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Freedom on the Net 2021 - Lebanon

Partly Free

51

/ 100

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Last Year's Score & Status

52 / 100 Partly Free

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free)

Overview

Internet freedom in Lebanon remained tenuous during the reporting period. An explosion in the port area of Beirut in August 2020 resulted in massive damage to the city's telecommunications infrastructure, leading to internet outages across the country. The ongoing economic crisis has created financial obstacles for internet service providers and users alike. During the coverage period, the government blocked websites and applications that provided currency-exchange services and information, accusing such platforms of causing the collapse of the Lebanese pound. Public officials continued pursuing cases against individuals who challenged prominent political figures in their social media posts. A number of online journalists and users were arrested during the coverage period. Internet users who criticized powerful political parties or armed groups—particularly Hezbollah—were subject to campaigns of harassment, intimidation, and physical attacks.

Lebanon's political system ensures representation for its officially recognized religious communities, but limits competition and impedes the rise of cross-communal or civic parties. While residents enjoy some civil liberties and media pluralism, they also suffer from pervasive corruption and major weaknesses in the rule of law. The country's large population of noncitizens, including refugees and migrant workers, remain subject to legal constraints and societal attitudes that severely restrict their access to employment, freedom of movement, and other fundamental rights. Lebanon has been deadlocked politically since August 2020, when Prime Minister Hassan Diab and his cabinet resigned after the blast and subsequent antigovernment protests.

Key Developments, June 1, 2020 - May 31, 2021

- On August 4, 2020, an explosion in the port area of Beirut caused massive infrastructural damage, including to telecommunications infrastructure, which led to internet outages across the country (see A1).
- The private companies managing Lebanon's two state-owned mobile operators, Alfa and Touch, transferred the providers to the Ministry of Telecommunications in September and October 2020. The Lebanese government now maintains functional control of the mobile telecommunications sector (see A4).
- In March 2021, the state-owned internet service provider (ISP) OGERO blocked online currency exchange platforms that did not reflect the government-approved exchange rate, at the request of judicial authorities (see B1 and B3).
- Hezbollah coordinates a network of social media accounts that seek to orchestrate harassment and disinformation campaigns online. The network is also reportedly linked to cyberattacks targeting entities worldwide, including in Lebanon (see B5 and C8).
- In October 2020, Saeed Abdullah was held in detention for 47 days after being charged with insulting the president in his Facebook posts (see C3).
- In February 2021, activist and publisher Loqman Slim was assassinated for his political views and critiques of Lebanese political parties and militias, potentially in retaliation for his criticism of Hezbollah (see C7).

A Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet 4 / connections? 6

Lebanon’s telecommunications infrastructure is weak and constrains access. Leaders have signalled their commitment to bringing about improvements to the country’s information and communications technology (ICT) sector, including through the eventual establishment of a fiber-optic cable and the roll out of fifth-generation (5G) service, however the ongoing economic crisis has slowed these plans.¹

Despite increasing demand for both fixed and mobile services in Lebanon, investment in the telecommunications sector has been slowed by the economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the extensive damage to infrastructure following the explosion in the port area of Beirut in August 2020.² Progress towards 5G service from Touch, a major mobile operator, has slowed during the reporting period.

The internet remained relatively slow and expensive during the reporting period, with an average broadband download speed of 17.27 megabits per second (Mbps) and an average mobile download speed of 45.74 Mbps in June 2021.³ According to the most recent data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), internet penetration stood at 78.19 percent and mobile internet penetration stood at 63.61 percent.⁴ As of January 2021, there were 5.31 million internet users and 4.57 million mobile connections in Lebanon according to the Digital 2021 report.⁵ According to the Inclusive Internet Index, Lebanon ranks 85th out of 110 countries surveyed on indicators related to availability, affordability, relevance, and readiness.⁶

On August 4, 2020, an explosion in the port area of Beirut (known as the Beirut Blast) caused massive damage to the surrounding infrastructure, including telecommunications infrastructure.⁷ Electrical and internet outages were observed in Beirut and the Mount Lebanon, North, and South Governorates. The internet outages were attributed to the explosion’s impact on telecommunications infrastructure, alongside power outages. Internet service provider TerraNet was heavily impacted by the blast, but was able to recover 85 percent of connectivity the day after the explosion.⁸

In June 2018, work commenced on the first part of a campaign known as “FTTx,” aimed at bringing internet connection speeds of at least 50 Mbps to certain areas through fiber-optic cables.⁹ This came after a highly publicized campaign in February 2018, when state-run telecommunications company OGERO officially launched a new version of its national internet strategy, which was first introduced to the public in November 2017.¹⁰ After the Council of Ministers allocated \$100 million to OGERO for fiber-optic cable development.¹¹ Following the February 2018 announcement of the FTTx project, OGERO awarded contracts to three Lebanese companies that “will partner with international vendors” for development: Power Tech, with Norway-based Nokia; BMB Group, with US-based Calix; and SERTA, with China-based Huawei.¹² The project, which has faced numerous delays, was 35 percent complete at the end of 2019.¹³ As of June 2021, FTTx was completed in 18 locations and partially deployed in 58 locations.¹⁴ FTTx is just one of multiple telecommunications projects that has faced difficulties due to the economic crisis.

The economic crisis also threatens the viability of both the internet and telecommunications sector. In January 2019, Imad Kreidieh, OGERO’s chairman, stated that if it did not receive \$4 million in foreign currency by the end of March 2020, it might be forced to shut down. Though this shutdown never occurred, newspaper *Al-Akhbar* reported in June 2020 that Touch, one of Lebanon’s two government-owned mobile service providers, failed to pay for the fuel that it depends on to continue to operate. According to *Al-Akhbar*, suppliers were no longer willing to accept Touch’s credits; if they were to stop supplying fuel for Touch operations, mobile services would cease within a month.¹⁵ The fuel shortage, which limits Lebanon’s electricity supply, continues to threaten the viability of telecommunication companies.

In June 2021, Kreidieh announced that the Lebanese people should not be surprised if they wake up one day without internet access.¹⁶ The currency collapse and the absence of a government has exacerbated extant financial issues within the telecommunications sector. OGERO faces many problems, according to Kreidieh, including the fuel shortage, the inability to import new equipment needed for maintenance, and the challenge of enrolling new subscribers during the economic crisis. The devaluation of the Lebanese pound also limits the viability of ISPs, which must pay to connect Lebanon to international undersea internet cables in US dollars but only receive subscriber payments in pounds.¹⁷

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the 1 / population for geographical, social, or other reasons? 3

Lebanon has expensive communications services, ranking fifth most expensive for mobile internet in the MENA region according to telecommunications company Cable.¹⁸ Internet subscription prices are set by the government, and internet service providers (ISPs) cannot lower prices unless a decree is issued by the Ministry of Telecommunications.¹⁹ The ongoing economic crisis has impacted people’s ability to finance communications services.

Rural areas remain less connected than urban ones and also experience longer daily power cuts.

In October 2019, the cabinet proposed a series of regressive taxes, including a tax on VoIP services such as WhatsApp, because of a 33 percent decline in telecommunications revenues.²⁰ The proposed VoIP taxes were announced alongside other regressive taxes on items including cigarettes. Alfa and Touch would have been able to charge users up to \$6 a month, or \$0.20 daily, but the ministry withdrew the proposal later that month, after protests began. The tax would have limited connectivity if enacted.

Lebanon is facing a complete economic collapse. Though the official exchange rate of approximately 1,500 pounds to the US dollar remains in place, the pound had lost approximately 90 percent of its value in informal exchanges as of June 2021.²¹ Communications services prices remained tied to the official exchange rate during the coverage period, ensure that Lebanon’s residents could still afford internet services, though there are fears the rate will change.

In April 2021, Kreidieh warned the Ministry of Telecommunications that OGERO would only be able to function for another six months if they did not receive more funding from the government.²² Kreidieh said the service provider would need approximately \$40 million to continue operating normally, citing OGERO’s 2019 budget, or would be forced to raise prices for subscribers. Kreidieh also noted that OGERO has slowed internet connections since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to account for budget cuts.²³

In May 2017, the cabinet authorized OGERO’s plan to decrease DSL prices. It was passed by the parliament the following month.²⁴

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of 4 / restricting connectivity? 6

While the government has periodically restricted mobile and internet connectivity in past years, no restrictions were reported during the coverage period.

From August 2014 to September 2017, mobile internet was inaccessible in the northeastern town of Aarsal for “security” reasons, according to former telecommunications minister Boutros Harb.²⁵ Though internet access was restored, there is no law in place to prevent the government from ordering a similar shutdown, and the Telecommunications Law provides it with the authority to do so again.²⁶

During the late 2019 protests, mobile internet connections were slower across downtown Beirut, but there was no evidence of intentional throttling. Alfa and Touch deployed additional assets, theoretically to increase coverage, to Martyrs’ Square in downtown Beirut.²⁷

The Lebanese government maintains a monopoly over the internet backbone, as well as over the fixed and mobile telephone industry in general, and therefore exercises tight control over ISPs. Lebanon has three international border gateways—in Tripoli, Jdeideh, and Beirut—where three underwater fiber-optic cables connect the country via the I-ME-WE (India-Middle East-Western Europe), Cadmos, and Berytar cables, respectively.²⁸ The gateways are all operated by OGERO, the state-owned fixed infrastructure operator.

The state owns mobile networks Touch and Alfa. While private firms Zain and Orascom Telecom Lebanon previously managed the two mobile networks, respectively, their tender expired in 2019 (see A4).²⁹

VoIP services are technically restricted under the 2002 Telecommunications Law, also known as Law 431/2002,³⁰ but this ban has only been sporadically enforced.³¹ OGERO installed equipment to block VoIP services in 2010 and then used it on a handful of occasions to block the Vonage VoIP service, though not Skype or WhatsApp. However, it backed down from the Vonage block after coming under pressure from businesses, civil society, and politicians.³²

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers? 1 / 6

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because the government functionally controls the mobile telecommunications sector, as private companies no longer manage the state-owned mobile service providers Alfa and Touch.

The telecommunications industry is largely government-owned and is tightly regulated.³³

The fixed-line telephone and internet network is owned and operated by OGERO, from which all companies must purchase services. In addition to running the backbone, OGERO, which claimed it had approximately 41 percent of the market share in 2017, sets internet prices and collectively manages online subscriptions with 114 private ISPs, including Cyberia, Terranet Sodeltel, and IDM.³⁴ OGERO reduced the monthly fee that ISPs pay for the E1 line, which enables voice telephone calls, from \$1,000 in 2014 to \$110 in 2018.³⁵

Private ISPs currently obtain a permit by decree from the telecommunications ministry.³⁶ Crucially, political influence can affect the allocation of contracts to private ISPs and mobile phone operators.³⁷ In February 2020, Social Media Exchange (SMEX), a Lebanese civil society group, released a full list of the 114 licensed ISPs, which it obtained from the telecommunications ministry.³⁸ Formerly, there were a number of “grey zone” providers, which purchased internet service internationally, but between 2014 and 2015 OGERO sold them access to its line at a

reduced price.³⁹ Prior to OGERO’s decision to allow private ISPs, former telecommunications minister Harb tried to penalize them by issuing complaints to the public prosecutor in an effort to put an end to “people extending internet services through illegal means.”⁴⁰

The Lebanese government functionally controls the mobile telecommunications sector as of October 2020. Previously, the two government-owned mobile service providers, Alfa and Touch, were provisionally managed by the private companies Orascom Telecom Lebanon and Zain, respectively.⁴¹ In early September 2020, the management contracts for the two companies were not renewed by the government. Later that month, Orascom announced that it transferred management of Alfa to the Ministry of Telecommunications. In October 2020, Zain followed suit. The new government will likely launch a new tender for mobile operator management contracts once it is constituted, in which case Zain and Orascom may likely bid again.⁴²

Because the government sets prices and issues permits for the number of subscriptions allowed, there is little competition in the industry, and the two companies split the market evenly.⁴³

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a 1 / free, fair, and independent manner? 4

Lebanese media and telecommunications laws are regulated by three semi-independent advisory bodies that report to the Council of Ministers. The National Council for Audiovisual Media and the Committee for Establishing Model Bylaws and Practices deal mainly with audiovisual media (television, radio, and satellite), while the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) is responsible for liberalizing, regulating, and developing the telecommunications sector.⁴⁴ Overall, the three bodies are limited in their power and do not have a reputation for being particularly robust or independent regulators, which makes the telecommunications ministry the de facto regulator.

The TRA is nominally independent, but in practice, influential political groups hold sway over the institution, often rendering it ineffective.⁴⁵ The telecommunications ministry retains the strongest influence over the ICT sector. In fact, three past telecommunications ministers have claimed that the TRA has no real authority, given that the law establishing its powers has not yet been implemented.⁴⁶ Tellingly, since its launch in 2007, many of the TRA’s objectives have not been met, including the transition from analog to digital networks and the privatization of the telecommunications sector.

In January 2017, Abdel-Moneim Youssef was dismissed from his two posts as head of OGERO and director general of investment and maintenance at the Ministry of Telecommunications. Youssef was under investigation for corruption and negligence, and was acquitted in June 2017.⁴⁷ The government subsequently appointed two replacements: Imad Kreidieh as head of OGERO, and Bassel al-Ayyoubi as director general of investment and maintenance at the telecommunications ministry.

B Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, 4 / particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 6

Over the past two years, the state has started to block more content, often failing to provide transparency about its decisions and inadvertently blocking additional content. Previously blocked content was limited to sites related to gambling, pornography, and Israel, but the government has recently started to block content outside of those parameters.

In June 2020, SMEX reported that websites using web-publishing service Blogger were blocked for users of state-owned mobile service providers Alfa and Touch. SMEX, who monitors website blockings, was alerted to the block after a user posted an article about Samir Kassir, a professor and journalist who was assassinated in 2005.⁴⁸ The service was later made accessible.

In May 2020, the general prosecutor ordered the Ministry of Telecommunications to block 28 applications, alleging that they were spreading misinformation about the unofficial exchange rate between the Lebanese pound and the US dollar. While the ministry was implementing the block, they also blocked Google Firebase services, which many developers and entrepreneurs rely on to build their applications.⁴⁹

In March 2021, top officials at an economic and financial security meeting announced that unofficial exchange rate platforms were the main reason behind the devaluation of the Lebanese pound. Subsequently, OGERO was asked by the judiciary to block all online platforms offering unofficial currency exchange. Several other ISPs followed suit, blocking applications and websites that did not reflect the government-approved exchange rate. The blocking order did not state how long the websites and apps would be blocked, which contradicts the 2018 Electronic Transactions and Personal Data Law (see B3).⁵⁰

In January 2019, the telecommunications minister allegedly ordered Alfa and Touch to block Grindr, a popular dating platform for LGBT+ individuals, on 3G and 4G mobile networks. Only Touch complied with the order.⁵¹ Sources close to the situation claimed that one of the security agencies, for reasons that were unclear, encouraged the telecommunications minister to block the application, which is technically illegal under Lebanese law.⁵² Then, that

May, OGERO blocked Grindr in response to a telecommunications ministry directive that referred to an order from the public prosecutor.⁵³ Though Grindr has since been available on mobile networks, this decision still sets a disturbing precedent.

Moreover, in December 2018, a judicial order cited the Israel Boycott Law, also known as Decree 12562 of April 19, 1963, to block Wix, the Israel-based web-hosting platform, without giving its users any prior notice.⁵⁴ Digital rights advocates argued that the state should at least have given users a warning so small businesses could prepare to move their websites to other hosts. Wix remains inaccessible on mobile networks and some ISPs, but is accessible on other ISPs.

In 2015, SMEX found that a total of 50 websites had remained inconsistently blocked in Lebanon,⁵⁵ including 23 related to escort services, 11 Israeli sites, 8 gambling websites, 2 websites that breached copyright, and one website identified as a forum for lesbians in the Arab region (see B3). The number of blocked websites has gone up in the last couple of years with, driven most recently by the blocking of exchange rate websites and apps.⁵⁶

In November 2014, the head of the Cybercrimes Bureau stated that it was monitoring terrorist content and that it had the ability to filter websites connected with terrorism (see C5).⁵⁷

YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and international blog-hosting services are freely available.

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 2 / 4

There have been incidents in which government security officials, particularly from the Cybercrimes Bureau, pressured individuals and ISPs to remove certain comments—mainly criticism of government officials or the army—from social media pages, blogs, and websites. This often occurs after the involved individual has been arrested.

During the reporting period, there were multiple examples of individuals summoned to appear before the Cybercrimes Bureau for content posted to social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook. In October 2020, Saeed Abdullah was arrested and detained for 47 days for Facebook posts that criticized the government and were “offensive to Christ” (see C3). He was charged with insulting the president and insulting religion, and was intimidated by authorities into deleting his post.⁵⁸

In December 2020, Lynn Tehini, a journalist and former advisor to the Ministry of Culture, appeared before investigators from the Cybercrimes Bureau after she was served with a defamation complaint filed by the ministry’s legal advisor, Judge Walid Jaber. The complaint regarded a post on Tehini’s Facebook account in which she criticized the judge for his role in the government’s failure to pay a salary to Bassam Saba, the director of the National Conservatory. The investigators forced her to delete her post.⁵⁹

In March 2021, the Cybercrimes Bureau summoned Ragheb al Shoufi for Facebook posts that were deemed insulting by Minister of Interior Muhammad Fahmy. Al Shoufi said he wrote these posts after being injured in a demonstration in front of the parliament. He was released three hours later, after being asked to delete the post and sign a pledge, likely promising not to post similar things in the future.⁶⁰

Users were also pressured into removing online content during the previous coverage period. For instance, in October 2019, journalist Amer Chibani was summoned over a Twitter post that said SGBL Bank was not dispensing US dollars.⁶¹ He was charged with threatening the financial stability of the country, and was asked to take the post down. In December 2019, filmmaker Rabi el-Amine was summoned after criticizing the policies of a local bank in a series of Facebook posts and was asked to either delete or edit them before he was released (see C3 and C7).⁶²

According to Google’s transparency report, one piece of content was restricted for defamation and one for privacy/security between January and June 2019.⁶³ From January to June 2020, Facebook restricted two pieces of content in response to “private reports related to defamation.”⁶⁴

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, or an independent appeals process? 2 / 4

Government decisions to restrict platforms have not always been fully transparent.

Under the 2018 Electronic Transactions and Personal Data Law, Article 125 allows the court to order “the suspension of certain electronic services, block certain websites or cancel accounts on such websites” linked to crimes including terrorism, child pornography, gambling, fraud, money laundering, and “crimes against internal and external security,” while Article 126 gives the public prosecutor power to suspend services and accounts and block websites for up to 30 days (see C5).⁶⁵

In March 2021, authorities ordered the blocking of unofficial exchange rate websites and apps for violating provisions in the National Monetary Law (see B1).⁶⁶ However, the order did not specify a time limit for the blocking of the content, contradicting the 2018 Electronic Transactions and Personal Data Law.

Generally, websites are blocked through court orders: the court receives a complaint and files it with the Cybercrimes Bureau for further investigation, later issuing a final order to the Ministry of Telecommunications, which then blocks the websites through OGERO. Website owners are not notified that their websites have been blocked, but still must appeal the blocking within 48 hours in order to have the decision overturned. However, the first blocking of Grindr, which took place in January 2019, was carried out in the absence of a court order.

Among intermittently blocked websites, those related to escort services were blocked in accordance with Articles 523 and 524 of the penal code (see B1). The Israeli sites were blocked in accordance with Decree 12562 of April 19, 1963, which called for the boycotting of Israel, while the gambling websites were blocked in accordance with Law 417 of 1995, which gives the “Casino du Liban” exclusive rights to the gambling industry. The websites blocked for copyright breaches were the result of a request from the US government. While many of these blocking orders are rooted in the law, the move to block six well-known pornographic websites in 2014 for alleged child sexual-abuse imagery drew the ire of some digital rights activists for the seemingly haphazard manner in which they were chosen.^{[67](#)}

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship? 2 / 4

Self-censorship is common in the blogosphere and in top media outlets, which are owned by powerful figures from all sides of the political spectrum. Users often fear repercussions from the government or certain political and sectarian groups if they post controversial content. In a 2018 report about online freedom of expression violations, Human Rights Watch noted that “many of the individuals interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported self-censoring after their often-intimidating experiences resulting from defamation lawsuits.”

Following anti-government protests that began in October 2019, journalists and activists have increasingly become victims of intimidation campaigns, which has resulted in further self-censorship (see C7). The current media law does not provide adequate protections for journalists and online users, and those who harass or attack them often face impunity, which has led more people to shy away from discussing certain topics online for fear of reprisal (see C2).^{[68](#)}

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest? 2 / 4

Reflecting Lebanon’s political fragmentation, Lebanese media is highly partisan and controlled by the dominant politico-sectarian actors. In December 2018, the Samir Kassir Foundation and Reporters Without Borders released the Media Ownership Monitor, which found that “the top news websites in Lebanon belong to, or mirror, the same political parties that own the country’s traditional media. The same political agendas reflected in traditional media also exist online.”^{[69](#)}

Elite families directly involved in politics own several prominent media outlets.^{[70](#)} For example, former prime minister Hariri and his family own Future TV, *Al-Mustaqbal* and the *Daily Star*, both print outlets with an online presence, and a host of other outlets. Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri partially owns the National Broadcasting Network (NBN) and its affiliates, while Hezbollah controls a vast network of media outlets, including Al-Manar TV and Al-Nour radio. Dominant political figures choose the heads of these outlets, and their news content often advances a particular partisan message. Politicians are also known to attempt to bribe the few independent news outlets and journalists that do exist, particularly during election periods. The structure of the Lebanese media sector also encourages foreign and business interests to invest money in these companies in exchange for influence.^{[71](#)}

Though bots have not been extensively documented in Lebanon, some outlets believe that Saudi Arabia-based bots were responsible for amplifying the “Hassan Diab is a Thief” hashtag that became popular in early 2020, when Prime Minister Diab formed a new cabinet. ^{[72](#)}

During the reporting period, the armed wing of Hezbollah spread disinformation online, targeting both Lebanese and international audiences. An investigation by the Telegraph found that the Lebanese militia had coordinated a network of social media users to spread their propaganda online, with support from Iran.^{[73](#)} The network orchestrates defamation campaigns against opponents of Hezbollah and seeks to disseminate and promote certain types of content online. Members are taught how to set up fake social media profiles, doctor pictures, spread propaganda, and avoid censorship by social media companies.^{[74](#)} The network, known by the moniker Lebanese Cedar, has also been responsible for a number of cyberattacks across the region (see C8).^{[75](#)}

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users’ ability to publish content online? 2 / 3

Independent digital media outlets struggle for sustainability due to Lebanon’s relatively weak digital advertising market, as the majority of advertising revenue is absorbed by television and other traditional media. One of the main obstacles in boosting the digital advertising market is Lebanon’s slow and unreliable internet as well as the ongoing economic crisis. ^{[76](#)}

According to Lebanon’s Press Law, it is “forbidden to issue a press publication without first obtaining a license.” However, in practice, it is quite difficult and expensive to obtain a license.^{[77](#)}

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability? 3 / 4

Lebanese users have access to a variety of local and international news and media. While relatively pluralistic, the media landscape is dominated by the agendas of powerful politico-sectarian leaders and their allies, often overshadowing the voices of minority groups (see B5).⁷⁸ However, a number of new independent online media outlets launched after widespread protests took place beginning in October 2019.

Despite evidence of some filtering, taboo subjects that would normally be banned from mainstream media outlets, such as pornography, content supportive of Israel, and sectarian hate speech, are generally available online. Because article 534 of the penal code has been used to prosecute LGBT+ individuals, content about the LGBT+ community operates in a legal grey zone and has been subject to censorship (see B1).

Facebook, Google, YouTube, Microsoft’s Live.com, and Wikipedia rank among the ten most visited websites in Lebanon.⁷⁹

Social media is popular in Lebanon, and many news outlets have created dedicated social media pages to reach broader audiences.⁸⁰ In 2021, the launch of the audio-only social media app Clubhouse has allowed online users in Lebanon to debate and discuss social, political, and economic reforms in the country, which are rarely covered transparently in traditional media.⁸¹ However, some users have reported that they were targeted with harassment—including death threats—on the app for sharing their anti-Hezbollah views. Hezbollah is known for threatening opponents, both on social media and offline (see C7).⁸²

B8 0-6 pts**Do conditions impede users’ ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on 5 / political and social issues? 6**

In recent years, civil society organizations and individual actors have used the internet as a primary or secondary tool to extend the reach of their national awareness-raising campaigns. During the reporting period, Lebanese people took to social media to campaign and mobilize around a number of causes, most notably following the Beirut Blast. After the explosion—and the revelation of government corruption and mismanagement that led to the blast—the hashtag *#علقوا_المشاقق* (“hang the nooses”) was used to demand accountability from Lebanon’s ruling parties.⁸³

While critiques of Lebanon’s political elites mounted on social media following the Beirut Blast, other users planned protests and organized online charity campaigns in the weeks following the explosion.⁸⁴ However, as online mobilization turned to in-person protests, there were reports that authorities were preying on digital spaces, such as social networking sites and messaging services, to limit anti-government demonstrations.⁸⁵

Other prominent social media campaigns that gained popularity during the reporting period were related to former foreign minister Gebran Bassil’s invite to Davos,⁸⁶ Loqman Slim’s murder (see C7).⁸⁷ and the murder of Zeina Kanjo by her husband, which sparked a debate on domestic violence across the country.⁸⁸

In October 2019, protests erupted after the government announced it would institute a tax on voice calls made over WhatsApp. Though the government reversed these plans, widespread demonstrations broke out against economic deterioration, corruption, and the political system.⁸⁹ During the protests, the hashtag *#لبنان_يَنْتَفِضُ* (“Lebanon rising up”) and several related hashtags spread in popularity, with users seeking to raise awareness about the protests. Some campaigns were amplified by media personalities with large followings.

However, some activists participating in the protests experienced offline and online harassment during the coverage period (see C7). During the protests, many activists faced harassment and doxxing threats from supporters of establishment parties and those who opposed the protests. Detractors accused activists of using illegal drugs, sexual promiscuity, and harbouring ties to other countries in the region, especially Syria. Additionally, government forces used WhatsApp chat groups to identify protest leaders and activists in order to harass or arrest them (see C5).⁹⁰

In December 2018, protests against corruption, the country’s poor economy, and the overall political situation were held in Beirut. Modelled after the yellow vest movement in France and numbering in the thousands, they were organized through social media (though some clashes erupted between protesters and security forces).⁹¹ In July 2019, around 500 protesters in Beirut demonstrated against an ongoing crackdown on online freedom of expression (see C3). The protest was also reflected online under the hashtag *#AgainstRepression* (translated).⁹²

C Violations of User Rights**C1 0-6 pts****Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to 2 / information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that 6 lacks independence?**

The constitution guarantees freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press. However, articles in the penal code and the military justice code place restrictions on freedom of expression (see C2). The judiciary also lacks independence, as it is subject to considerable political influence.⁹³

Other issues persist. While Lebanon passed a law on the right to access information in 2017,⁹⁴ state agencies rarely comply. For example, when the Gherbal Initiative, a Lebanese nongovernmental organization, sent access-to-information requests to 133 administrations, they received just 34 responses.⁹⁵ In the wake of the protests that began in October 2019, there has been a push for stronger enforcement of the Access to Information Law, and the law is now being viewed as a potential tool to reduce corruption.⁹⁶

In August 2020, after the Beirut Blast, the Lebanese parliament approved a two-week state of emergency.⁹⁷ The state of emergency afforded the government broad powers, including to set curfew, ban gatherings, and censor publications that threaten national security.⁹⁸ Rights groups warned that this could hinder essential freedoms, including press freedom.⁹⁹

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that 2 / are protected under international human rights standards? 4

The Lebanese penal code prohibits defamation of the president, public officials, and the army. Article 157 of the military code of justice also prohibits insults against the army.¹⁰⁰

In 2016, the Court of Cassation ended the debate over which law regulates speech promulgated on social media in Lebanon, opting to place it under the jurisdiction of the penal code instead of the Publications Law.¹⁰¹ Because the Publications Law does not explicitly refer to electronic publishing and websites, the Criminal Court of Cassation used the general definition of “publication” from legal articles to decide whether a given website qualified as a press publication. This resulted in some confusion about what forms of online speech are subject to restriction under the Publications Law. The Publications Court has considered journalists’ social media posts to fall under its jurisdiction, even as a number of other courts and nonjudicial bodies have prosecuted journalists for articles they wrote.

Meanwhile, despite the fact that social media posts contain letters, forms, words, and pictures, the Publications Court also decided that social media posts are special publications not intended for distribution to the public on an ongoing basis, in a specific name, and with successive parts—and therefore not subject to the regulations relating to the Publications Law. Instead, the court ruled definitively that social media posts are subject to the penal code, which contains fewer protections for individuals.¹⁰² The authorities use Article 317, which penalizes those who incite sectarianism or racial strife; Articles 383 to 387, which criminalize the defamation of public officials and the insulting of national emblems; and Articles 473 and 474, which concern blasphemy and religious rituals, to prosecute legitimate online speech.

In July 2020, 14 Lebanese and international organizations announced the creation of the “coalition to defend freedom of expression in Lebanon.” The mission of the coalition is to push for a new media law and ensure the protection of freedom of speech in Lebanon. During and after the October 2019 demonstrations, the coalition documented increasing attacks on journalists and online activists.¹⁰³ In July 2020, members of the coalition obtained a leaked draft of a new media law that would amend existing defamation provisions in the current media law.¹⁰⁴ As of June 2021 the draft media law had not been passed.

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international 3 / human rights standards? 6

A significant crackdown on online freedom of expression began in late 2017 and has continued over the past three years.¹⁰⁵

According to SMEX, seven people were arrested for online activity in 2020, and 42 were summoned by security officials for their online activity. 18 of those summoned were accused of libel and slander, and nine were accused of criticizing the president. Nine people were detained, including one person held for 47 days. In 13 of the cases, social media users were required to delete the content they posted online (see B2). Between January and June 2021, two people were arrested and 15 were summoned because of their online activity, according to SMEX’s reporting.¹⁰⁶

The public prosecutor has ordered security forces to detain internet users, who are sometimes subjected to multiday interrogations, particularly at the hands of Cybercrimes Bureau—which was established in 2006 without a legislative decree that outlined its mandate or defined cybercrime.¹⁰⁷ It often pressures social media users to apologize for their posts, delete controversial content, and sign a letter promising not to harm those offended in the future. While some cases have reached the courts, few are publicly known. Security and military agents also appear to be monitoring social media, leading to interrogations (see C5).¹⁰⁸

A number of individuals were detained during the coverage period for criticizing top government officials, particularly President Michel Aoun and former foreign minister Gebran Bassil. Numerous lawsuits were filed by other public officials and religious figures, alleging defamation and other offenses. Muhal for Freedom of Expression, an initiative operated by SMEX, reported on several of these cases.

In February 2020, Ahmed Hamwi and Zaid al-Madani were arrested for posting videos that mocked Bassil and President Aoun while Hamwi and al-Madani were in the Presidential Palace for maintenance work. They were released a day later, but their phones were seized by the Internal Security Forces (ISF) for investigation.¹⁰⁹ In June 2020, the Cybercrimes Bureau summoned Ali al-Mousawi, editor in chief of the online magazine Mahkama, after Judge Ghada Aoun filed a complaint against him because of an article about Aoun that Mahkama had published. Al-Mousawi subsequently appeared in front of the Court of Publications.¹¹⁰

In August 2020, Raed al-Masry, a professor, and Alwan Amin al-Din, the founder and director of the Sita Center for Studies, were summoned to appear in front of the Department of Criminal Investigations for an article published on the Sita Center website. The article detailed the corruption of Fouad Ayoub, president of the Lebanese University. They were released shortly after being interrogated.^{[111](#)}

In September 2020, the Cybercrimes Bureau summoned journalists Naufal Daoou and Assaad Bechara following a complaint submitted by parliamentarian Cesar Abi Khalil in 2017, allegedly for tweets relating to the Ministry of Energy.^{[112](#)}

In May 2021, comedian Shaden Fakih was summoned to appear in front of the Cybercrimes Bureau. During the investigation, Fakih found out that the reason for the summon was because of a video she had posted in which she called the government lockdown e-platform to ask for permission to leave her house to buy sanitary pads. No action was taken by the state following the summon.^{[113](#)}

During the reporting period, a number of online users were summoned to the Cybercrimes Bureau and forced to delete online content (see B2). In December 2020, Lynn Tehini, a journalist and former advisor to the Ministry of Culture, appeared before investigators from the Cybercrimes Bureau after she was served with a defamation complaint filed by the ministry's legal advisor, Judge Walid Jaber. The complaint regarded a post on Tehini's Facebook account in which she criticized the judge for his role in the government's failure to pay a salary to Bassam Saba, the director of the National Conservatory. The investigators forced her to delete her post.^{[114](#)}

In October 2020, Saeed Abdullah was detained for 47 days for posts on his Facebook page. He was charged with criticizing the president and publishing a picture that was deemed offensive to Christ. In January 2021, the Cybercrimes Bureau again arrested Abdullah, detaining him for eight days on charges of insulting symbols of the Druze community. He was arrested after Unitarian Druze community leaders submitted a complaint against Abdullah for his Facebook posts. His case remains open.^{[115](#)}

In March 2021, the Cybercrimes Bureau summoned Ragheb al Shoufi for Facebook posts that were deemed insulting by Minister of Interior Muhammad Fahmy. Al Shoufi said he wrote these posts after being injured in a demonstration in front of the parliament. He was released three hours later, after being asked to delete the post and sign a pledge, likely promising not to post similar things in the future.^{[116](#)}

People were also arrested for their online activities during the previous coverage period. In July 2019, airport security personnel arrested Mohamed Wehbi upon his arrival from Africa for commenting on a social media post which insulted President Aoun and defended Imam Sadr, a Lebanese-Iranian philosopher who helped give rise to the Amal movement. Wehbi was detained for 12 days and was then released with a residency permit.^{[117](#)} Muhal also noted the November 2019 arrest of Zaher Kais, who broadcast footage of security forces attacking demonstrators on Facebook Live.^{[118](#)} In May 2019, the head of Lebanon's General Labor Confederation, Bechara Asmar, was arrested and detained for 10 days for insulting late Maronite cardinal Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir in a leaked video.^{[119](#)} A few days later, Asmar resigned. Beirut investigative judge Georges Rizk ordered his release, setting a bail of 500,000 Lebanese pounds (\$330).

In February 2020, three activists and journalists were summoned by the Criminal Investigation Department for spreading "fake news about a local party and inciting sectarianism and racism" online. Two were released, though activist Charbel al-Khoury was arrested for online messages criticizing the leadership of a political party, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). He was released several hours later.^{[120](#)}

In June 2019, Ali Ismail was summoned by the Cybercrimes Bureau regarding a post containing an image of an *Al-Diyar* newspaper article entitled "\$500 million from Cedar to Bassil to Purchase Treasury Bonds." Ismail was released later that night, without signing a pledge.

In April 2019, the General Directorate of General Security (GDGS) arrested Rasheed Joumblatt, former leader of the Arab Tawhid Party, on charges of "inciting sectarian strife and insulting some positions" and "insulting and slandering Minister Gebran Bassil." Then foreign minister Bassil filed a complaint based on a critical Facebook video; Joumblatt was released on bail after four days, and Bassil later dropped his complaint.^{[121](#)} Bassil previously sued Yara Shehayeb in 2018 for defamation after she made a critical social media post against him; the suit was later dropped.^{[122](#)} In February 2019, the Cybercrimes Bureau questioned Ziad Itani over posts criticizing former Cybercrimes Bureau head Suzanne al-Hajj and her family. Itani was permitted to leave after deleting the posts and pledging not to approach the family.^{[123](#)} On September 14, 2020, Ziad Itani was served with a defamation, libel, and slander lawsuit by the head of the State Security Directorate for allegedly damaging the prestige of the state, spreading false accusations, threatening officers, fabricating false confessions, and misleading the judiciary.^{[124](#)}

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption? 3 / 4

The government requires registration for prepaid SIM cards, and has considered introducing biometric registration.^{[125](#)}

Effective September 2018, the Ministry of Telecommunications requires individuals to register their International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI) number, which corresponds to their phone number, on an unsecure government website.^{[126](#)} In December 2017, the Ministry of Telecommunications proposed the introduction of biometric SIM

cards, which would force every person who purchases a SIM card to provide biometric information. The ministry did not expand on how this plan would work in a country where people routinely purchase mobile phones from private shops, but cited "security concerns" as the reason for the proposal.^{[127](#)}

Although it was introduced as a tax to increase revenue, the government's proposed plan to tax VoIP services would have likely pushed individuals to use Lebanon's unencrypted mobile network.

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' right to privacy? 2 / 6

Mass digital surveillance in Lebanon is facilitated by the weak legal framework on digital privacy, and a legal framework that gives the government a wide mandate to conduct surveillance.^{[128](#)}

Article 14 of the constitution "ensures the inviolability of the home," but it is unclear if this law applies to private communications.^{[129](#)} The Telecommunications Interception Act of 1999 (Law 140/1999) nominally protects the secrecy of communications, but it has limitations and does not mention modern forms of electronic communication. Moreover, the law gives the government the right to surveil communications if a judge grants government agencies access, or if the ministry of interior or minister of defense submits a request to the prime minister for matters concerning "combating terrorism, state security, or crimes related to state security."^{[130](#)}

In October 2018, the parliament passed the Electronic Transactions and Personal Data Law, which fails to adequately safeguard personal data (see C6). By granting the Ministry of Economy and Trade the responsibility to process data requests, the law effectively turns it into a data protection authority. In addition, Article 97 gives the Ministers of Interior, Defense, Justice, and Health the authority to license data related to state security, court proceedings, and health, placing even more power in the executive branch. Moreover, the law only mentions the instances where a license is not required, rather than clearly outlining all the instances in which entities must obtain a license. Additionally, it does not define a number of key terms, such as "consent," and fails to place limits on data storage.^{[131](#)}

During the 2019 protests, ISF officers infiltrated protesters' WhatsApp groups and made arrests based on information shared in these groups.^{[132](#)} SMEX also received reports of security agencies confiscating detainees' phones for unusually long periods of time. Technical analyses revealed attempts at surveillance and unlawful searches during the reporting period.^{[133](#)}

During the October 2019 demonstrations, security agencies arrested protesters and frequently seized their devices, which constitutes a breach of privacy and an infringement on basic rights. In response to these seizures, a circular was issued by the General Prosecutor on December 3, 2019, which emphasizes the detainees' basic rights to privacy however, it did not effectively rein in the search and seizure of devices.^{[134](#)}

In February 2020, *Al-Akhbar* revealed that mobile service provider Alfa purchased deep packet inspection (DPI) software from Sandvine in 2015 and used the technology to share information with security agencies. Additionally, Alfa spent \$3 million on a newer DPI system, produced by NEXIUS, in 2018, but that system is still not functional.^{[135](#)}

In October 2017, the cabinet gave security agencies renewed, unhindered access to all telecommunications metadata for a period of four months, after some ministers raised concerns on a previous cabinet motion that had granted access for four months to one year (see C6). The cabinet requested that security apparatuses no longer have unhindered access to telecommunications data in the future.^{[136](#)} Additionally, intelligence agencies have separate links to different politicians or parties, and in turn their own agendas, which has led to privacy violations.

In January 2018, the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and mobile-security firm Lookout reported that a surveillance operation called Dark Caracal operated out of a GDGS building in Beirut,^{[137](#)} targeting military personnel, government officials, activists, journalists, and lawyers in 21 countries. The operation relied on a unique mobile surveillance tool, dubbed Pallas, which was able to extract hundreds of gigabytes of data from Android devices. Using spear-phishing tactics, Dark Caracal sent Facebook and WhatsApp URLs to users that redirected them to a "watering hole" to download malware-laden, counterfeit versions of secure messaging and circumvention applications. The malware was able to extract messages and phone calls, download applications, monitor calls, and upload files onto Android devices. Additionally, the operation employed traditional malware such as CrossRAT and BandoorRAT to extract information from desktop devices.

Security agencies also used surveillance technologies such as FinFisher, Bluecoat PacketShaper, and International Mobile Subscriber Identity (IMSI) catchers.^{[138](#)} WikiLeaks exposed the government's use of FinFisher, which is sold exclusively to law enforcement agencies and allows them to exploit system updates on targets' computers. In a 2018 report by Citizen Lab, a Canadian internet watchdog, Lebanon is listed as one of 45 countries worldwide in which devices were likely breached by Pegasus, a targeted spyware software developed by the NSO Group, an Israeli technology firm. Pegasus is known to be used by governments to spy on journalists, human rights defenders, and the opposition, though it is unclear whether the Lebanese government is a Pegasus client.^{[139](#)}

The rise in the use of biometric technologies by security agencies has also highlighted the need for a stronger data protection law. After the GDGS adopted biometric passports in 2016, the government has embarked on more questionable identification initiatives (see C4).^{[140](#)} In April 2017, the government announced that it would begin issuing biometric residence permits to foreigners.^{[141](#)} The government elected to issue biometric election cards as

well, but it ultimately abandoned the idea due to a lack of resources and time constraints. Without a strong data protection law or a judiciary committee, it is unclear if the biometric data is actually being protected and could be used to increase surveillance.[142](#)

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, state-owned COVID-management platforms emerged in an attempt to contain the pandemic. One of these platforms, IMPACT, was used to issue mobility permits for during pandemic-related lockdowns. Another platform, COVAX, was used to track vaccine registrations. SMEX criticized the platforms for lacking privacy policies. Following SMEX’s report, IMPACT published a privacy policy. Both platforms are owned and coordinated by the state. As such they are not subject to the requirements for data protection and user consent in the Electronic Transactions and Personal Data Law, raising privacy concerns about privacy.[143](#)

In September 2020, the Ministry of Public Health launched Ma3an Together Against Corona, a contact-tracing application intended to stop the spread of COVID-19. Based on a preliminary review, SMEX found that the application collects limited personal data but contains a few security flaws.[144](#)

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies 2 / infringe on users’ right to privacy? 6

Lebanon does not have comprehensive data protection laws. The Electronic Transactions and Personal Data Law, which was passed in October 2018, fails to provide adequate safeguards to protect user data and privacy. The law designates the Ministry of Economy and Trade as Lebanon’s data protection authority. While the law includes certain provisions around data rights, transparency requirements, data retention limitations, and security measures, it fails to adequately protect user data due to vague language, inadequate safeguards for user data, and the lack of an independent oversight authority.[145](#)

The government continued to request user account information from major companies such as Google, Twitter, and Facebook during the coverage period.[146](#) In recent years, the cabinet has passed motions giving the security agencies temporary but unhindered access to all telecommunications metadata (see C5). Alfa and Touch are compelled to comply because they are owned by the government.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Lebanese authorities gave licenses to private companies for vaccine distribution. One of these companies, Pharmaline, sent out virtual contracts to people seeking vaccination. SMEX found that the contract had major privacy and data protection issues. In their consent form, Pharmaline requires applicants to agree in advance to have their personal data and any vaccine-related information shared with pharmaceutical company Pharmatrade, insurance company NextCare, and the country’s vaccination centers, without any justification as to the role of these parties in the vaccination process. This request to process data without a license from the Ministry of Economy contradicts the Electronic Transactions and Personal Data Law (see C5). It is unclear if Pharmaline or the Ministry of Economy took steps to respond to SMEX’s concerns.[147](#)

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other 2 / actor in relation to their online activities? 5

Journalists and ordinary citizens sometimes face intimidation for their online comments. During the protests that began in October 2019, a number of activists were doxxed and harassed. The doxxing efforts often targeted activists who were recorded on video as participating in or leading protests (see B8). Detractors often insinuated that the activists used illegal drugs, were sexually promiscuous, or had links to foreign countries. Harassers also sometimes highlighted activists’ sympathy for Syrian refugees.

In February 2021, political activist and publisher Loqman Slim was assassinated, allegedly for his political views and critiques of Lebanese political parties and militias, particularly Hezbollah. Slim was a prominent Hezbollah critic and had received death threats from the group in 2019, although no group took responsibility for his murder.[148](#) He was active on social media and was frequently quoted and interviewed by online news outlets.[149](#)

Political parties and armed groups have been known to target their critics through online harassment and intimidation campaigns, which have at times led to offline attacks. A number of online users have received threats from Hezbollah supporters via the application Clubhouse for their constant criticism of the militia (see B7).[150](#)

In March 2021, Lebanese journalist Mariam Seifeddine, a known Hezbollah critic, was violently assaulted and her family and received death threats.[151](#) Seifeddine attributed her threats to her Hezbollah criticism, which is published in newspapers and on social media. Seifeddine is known for firmly opposing the ruling class and happens to live in a Hezbollah-controlled area.[152](#)

Luna Safwan, a journalist, received threats from multiple social media accounts belonging to supporters of the Amal party and Hezbollah. Safwan believes these attacks were in retaliation for a tweet she posted criticizing Hezbollah; it was retweeted by an Israeli governmental agency, prompting internet users to accuse Safwan of collaborating with Hezbollah’s enemy.[153](#)

In October 2020, the nongovernmental organization Legal Agenda reported that journalists who received online threats and are victims of assaults were driven to self-censor (see B4).¹⁵⁴ For example, Mahassen Mousel was the victim of social media hate campaign after false information circulated online alleging that she had been arrested for treason and collaboration with Israel.¹⁵⁵ In December 2020, journalist Ghadi Francis was stalked by one of her social media followers.¹⁵⁶

Journalists and photojournalists were injured by counterprotesters and security forces during the previous coverage period. In late October 2019, supporters of the Amal political movement beat *An-Nahar* journalist Ali Awada after clashes between party supporters and protesters on Beirut's Ring Bridge.¹⁵⁷ In December, Amal and Hezbollah supporters, who opposed the protests, stole and damaged equipment from journalists Nawal Berry and Dima Sadek. In January 2020, security forces cracked down on protesters and injured a number of journalists from Al-Jadeed, MTV, and Reuters.¹⁵⁸ One social media post showed security forces firing tear gas directly at a group of local journalists.¹⁵⁹

In December 2019, filmmaker Rabih el-Amine was "followed and challenged by an unknown man" after posting comments on his Facebook page that were viewed as "insulting." El-Amine was physically attacked and suffered a broken nose.¹⁶⁰

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to 2 / widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack? 3

Cybersecurity breaches, cyberwarfare, and criminal hacks have been worrying trends in recent years.

In 2021, a group of hackers linked to Hezbollah breached 250 servers in different countries, including Lebanon, and stole sensitive data. The group of hackers, known as the "Lebanese Cedar" or "Volatile Cedar," also seeks to manipulate online narratives to favor Hezbollah (see B5). According to Check-Point and Kaspersky labs, the hackers began working in 2012 and relied on a custom remote access virus. According to the report, the victims of the attack included individuals, companies, and institutions, including defense contractor firms and educational institutions.¹⁶¹

In April 2021, a leak impacted more than half a billion Facebook users, including 1.8 million Lebanese users, who had their personal information compromised.¹⁶²

In September 2019, hackers broke into the Ministry of Finance's website and threatened to leak ministry data. In November 2018, Cisco Talos Intelligence Group found that the Ministry of Finance and private Lebanese air carrier Middle East Airlines were targets of a cyberattack by unknown perpetrators.¹⁶³ According to Ihab Chaaban, ICT security officer at the Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform (OMSAR), there was a 4,000 percent increase in the rate of cyberattacks between 2012 and 2017.¹⁶⁴

A committee of ministry, military, intelligence, and private-sector representatives was established in November 2018 by former prime minister Saad Hariri, and was tasked with presenting recommendations to the parliament on establishing a national cybersecurity agency in 2019.¹⁶⁵

In May 2018, Kaspersky Lab, a Moscow-based cybersecurity firm, reported that it identified a cyberespionage campaign, with servers based in Iran, that targeted Android users in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Iran.¹⁶⁶ The operation had the capability to record audio and extract messages, browser data, GPS information, and images. While the Kaspersky Lab report provided no information about the Lebanese targets, it noted that the operation specifically targeted employees of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in Jordan. In a follow-up interview with Vice, one of the researchers also noted that the campaign targeted individuals who worked with international NGOs.

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