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Freedom of the Press 2013 - Lebanon

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2013 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score: 53

Legal Environment: 18

Political Environment: 21

Economic Environment: 14

Lebanon's media environment remained freer than those of most other Middle Eastern countries in 2012, but there were several incidents in which officials attempted to curb freedoms of speech and expression. Attacks against journalists also increased as the conflict in Syria spilled over into Lebanon, heightening political and sectarian tensions.

The constitution provides for freedom of the press, but vague laws prohibiting the publication of news deemed to contravene "national ethics" or trample "religious feelings" remain on the books. Journalists are also prohibited from insulting the head of state or foreign leaders, and those charged with press offenses may be prosecuted in a special publications court. Lebanese journalists complain that the media laws are chaotic, contradictory, and broadly worded. Provisions concerning the media can be found in the penal code, the Publications Law, the 1994 Audiovisual Media Law, and the military justice code, giving the government considerable leeway to prosecute journalists at will, though it rarely does so. The Audiovisual Media Law prohibits broadcasting of political or religious gatherings that have not been previously authorized. It also bans "commentary seeking to affect directly or indirectly the well-being of the nation's economy and finances, material that is propagandistic or promotional, or promotes a relationship with Israel." A Lebanese media watchdog group has crafted legal amendments that would abolish prison sentences for crimes related to publishing, loosen restrictions on electronic media, provide for greater transparency of media ownership and financing, and halt requirements for prior licensing of political publications. The proposals were pending at the end of 2012. Early in the year, the Ministry of Information (MOI) proposed the Lebanon Internet Regulation Act (LIRA), which would have allowed the government to restrict online expression. The bill was scrapped after major public outcry.

A draft law on access to information that was proposed in 2009 would allow citizens to request documents and data held by public bodies. It was debated in the parliament in October 2012, but was still awaiting approval at year's end.

The licensing of print media outlets is subject to quotas for different types of publications and restrictions on the number of days an outlet can publish. Broadcast licenses are allocated to ensure that each of the country's sectarian groups is represented in the media landscape. The Audiovisual Media Law granted six new licenses to political and sectarian groups, and several additional television outlets with partisan and sectarian affiliations have been granted licenses since then. The MOI and the National Council for Audiovisual Media have the right not to renew licenses for radio and television, and also require foreign publications to register for a license prior to distribution in the country. In 2012, the Audiovisual Workers' Union was established, and the Journalists' Union membership expanded, strengthening the professional support network for the media sector.

The media environment in Lebanon is both vibrant and diverse, and outlets are able to express many different viewpoints and cover important events. However, most media outlets are affiliated with political groups, which can impede those outlets' ability to report from areas controlled by rival factions.

The Directorate of General Security (SG) is authorized to censor all foreign magazines, books, and films before they are distributed, as well as pornography and political or religious material that is deemed a threat to the national security of either Lebanon or Syria. The government sporadically investigated and detained journalists and attempted to censor news and information during 2012. In August, the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International (LBCI) and the television station Al-Jadeed were accused by the MOI of provoking instability with their coverage of kidnappings taking place in Lebanon and Syria as a result of the Syrian conflict. Local coverage of Syria-related events has also prompted cyberattacks on the websites of journalists and media outlets. In January 2012, hackers struck the Facebook pages of Future News TV host Paula Yacoubian and the magazine *Al-Jaras*, as well as the Now Lebanon news website. In September, the Lebanese civil society organization MARCH launched the Virtual Museum of Censorship, an online database of censorship cases in the country since the 1940s. According to the database, there were at least 23 instances of censorship or attempted censorship of books, movies, the press, and art in Lebanon in 2012. Cases included the banning of several movies and the book *A Brief History of the Middle East*, censorship of "immoral content" on Al-Jadeed, and the arrest of graffiti artists.

Journalists in Lebanon continue to face violence, harassment, and intimidation due to tensions inside the country as well as spillover from the worsening conflict in Syria. These threats have led to increasing self-censorship. In April 2012, Ali Shaaban, a cameraman for Al-Jadeed, was killed by Syrian security forces while covering the conflict from a Lebanese town near the border. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, nine journalists were attacked in May and June while reporting on demonstrations and street violence, including clashes between supporters and opponents of the Syrian government. In June, the Beirut headquarters of Al-Jadeed was attacked by gunmen after it aired an interview with Ahmed al-Assir, a controversial Sunni cleric. In September, members of the Shiite militant group Hezbollah seized Rami Aysha, a Lebanese-Palestinian journalist reporting on arms smuggling into Syria, and handed him over to state security forces, which detained him for nearly a month. He reported being beaten by both the Hezbollah agents and military police officers.

Lebanon was the first country in the Middle East to authorize private ownership of radio and television stations. It boasts a vibrant media industry that includes more than a dozen privately owned daily newspapers in English, Arabic, and French, and more than 1,500 weekly and monthly periodicals. The two largest Arabic-language dailies are *As-Safir* and *An-Nahar*, owned by Shiite Muslim and Maronite Christian families, respectively. There are nine television stations, two digital cable companies, and about 40 radio stations that are similarly linked to confessional groups. News content typically reflects the political viewpoint of a given outlet's affiliated ethnic or religious group. Politicians and influential families own most media companies, and politicians also frequently sit on their boards.

Access to satellite television has grown substantially over the last decade. In 2012, the MOI and the Telecommunications Ministry said they were preparing plans to launch a "Smart Media City" project that would improve the telecommunications infrastructure and allow additional satellite television stations and production studios to be set up.

In 2012, 61 percent of the population had access to the internet. The Telecommunications Ministry controls the international gateway for internet traffic. The country lacks the infrastructure necessary for high-quality broadband connections, and does not have a special network to transmit data, relying instead on existing landline telephone networks. Social-media platforms including Twitter and Facebook are popular among Lebanon's internet users.

The advertising market in Lebanon is extremely limited, and is not able to sustain the breadth of media outlets operating in the country. The Choueiri Group, one of the largest media brokerage firms in the Middle East, has long dominated the small market that does exist. According to the local business magazine *Executive*, it controls an estimated 70 percent of Lebanon's ad spending.

Financial setbacks and regional developments in 2012 affected employment for journalists in Lebanon. LBCI TV laid off almost 400 of its staff. AWI, which owns *Al-Balad*, *Al-Waseet*, and the *Layaleena* magazine, laid off 50 employees. Saudi prince Al-Waleed bin Talal – after winning a lengthy court battle in 2011 that allowed him to increase his holdings in LBC SAT, the satellite channel previously affiliated with LCBI, and its production arm, the Production and Acquisition Company (PAC) – later liquidated PAC, leading to significant layoffs in 2012.

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