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Freedom on the Net 2023 - Lebanon

PARTLY FREE

50

/ 100

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LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

51 / 100 Partly Free

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free). See the [research methodology](#) and [report acknowledgements](#).

Overview

Internet freedom in Lebanon remains tenuous, and the ongoing economic crisis has created major financial obstacles for internet service providers (ISPs) and users alike. A recent crackdown on government criticism resulted in several high-profile online journalists and activists being summoned for investigation by the Cybercrimes Bureau. While few websites are blocked and the online ecosystem is relatively diverse, online users are increasingly self-censoring their political speech. With support from Iran, Hezbollah's "electronic army" continues to launch online disinformation campaigns and frequently harasses those who criticize the group or its policies.

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, remains subject to

legal constraints and societal attitudes that severely restrict their access to employment, freedom of movement, and other fundamental rights.

Key Developments, June 1, 2022 - May 31, 2023

- The ongoing economic crisis negatively impacted telecommunications services and affordability (see A1 and A2).
- Several high-profile journalists and activists were summoned to the Cybercrimes Bureau in retaliation for their online content (see B2 and B3).
- LGBT+ hate speech increased during the coverage period, and several online journalists were subject to violent harassment campaigns, often perpetrated by Hezbollah supporters (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 connections? 3 / 6

Score Change: This score declined from 4 to 3 to correct for an error in one of the sources used to calculate internet speeds, though the ongoing economic crisis continued to undermine access to quality internet service.

Lebanon's telecommunications infrastructure is weak and constrains internet access. The ongoing economic crisis has impacted telecommunications services, and users experienced service disruptions and decreased internet speeds during the reporting period.¹

Internet penetration in Lebanon stood at 86.6 percent in January 2023,² down from 89.3 percent in January 2022.³ Internet speeds slowed during the reporting period.⁴ In May 2023, the median broadband and mobile download speeds were 8.31 megabits per second (Mbps) and 31.54 Mbps, respectively.⁵ According to the Inclusive Internet Index for 2022, Lebanon ranks 74th out of 110 countries surveyed on indicators related to internet availability, affordability, relevance, and readiness.⁶

Lebanon's economic crisis, exacerbated by the collapse of its currency, threatens the viability of the information and communication technology (ICT) sector. Furthermore, rolling electrical blackouts have left people without access to the internet.⁷ During the coverage period, telecommunications companies struggled to cover the cost of the fuel needed to run and maintain their services,⁸ which led to increased prices for consumers (see A2).⁹ Fuel shortages caused several localized service disruptions during the coverage period.¹⁰

Employees of OGERO, the country's official telecommunications distributor, went on strike in March 2023 to protest their low salaries,¹¹ disrupting mobile and fixed-line services in various regions. OGERO employees assured customers that the disruptions were caused by a lack of funding for maintenance and were unrelated to the strike.¹² In response, Telecommunications Minister Johnny Corm threatened that the army would take over OGERO's control centers, though it did not do so.¹³ In May 2023, another OGERO strike resulted in scheduled internet cuts across the country.¹⁴

Rural areas are often more affected by electricity blackouts than urban areas. For example, mobile networks are frequently disrupted by power outages in the Bekaa Valley and north Lebanon. In these regions, Syrian mobile networks have taken over "amid the complete absence of Lebanese network coverage."¹⁵ The safety of Syrian networks is questionable due to the ongoing war, and it is impossible to determine whether those who control Syrian mobile networks are collecting user metadata.

In May 2022, the Lebanese government approved two decisions concerning the ICT sector. The first was to raise the price of services (see A2). The second was to shut down the second-generation (2G) network and parts of the third-generation (3G) network.¹⁶ Shutting down these networks could leave more than 230,000 subscribers without access to mobile services until they upgrade their devices and will primarily impact rural users. It will also put a strain on the fourth-generation (4G) network, which could decrease the quality of mobile connectivity.¹⁷

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons? 0 / 3

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because internet access became prohibitively expensive due to the current economic crisis and crippling corruption in the ICT sector.

Lebanon has expensive communications services, and costs have been exacerbated by the ongoing economic crisis. A significant divide in access exists between rural and urban areas.¹⁸ Disruptions are more frequent in rural areas like the Bekaa Valley and north Lebanon, and rural dwellers often only have access to 2G or 3G networks.¹⁹

The ongoing economic crisis has impacted people's ability to afford telecommunications services, which have become prohibitively expensive for the nearly 75 percent of people living on less than \$14 a day as of the end of 2022.²⁰ According to Cable, a telecommunications company, Lebanon ranked 169th out of 233 countries and territories for mobile data

pricing in 2022.²¹ One gigabyte (GB) of mobile data cost \$3, while the average monthly fixed-line broadband package cost \$18.53 in 2022.²²

Internet subscription prices are set by the government, and ISPs cannot lower prices unless a decree is issued by the Ministry of Telecommunications.²³ In May 2022, the government announced that it would be raising telecommunications prices, basing them on the Sayrafa currency exchange rate.²⁴ This quadrupled the price of mobile data, making it inaccessible to many users.²⁵ In January 2023, after the Sayrafa exchange rate was set, the price of a basic 1.5 GB mobile phone plan nearly tripled, and by March it cost users 530,000 Lebanese pounds (\$35.33).²⁶ Also in March, the Ministry of Telecommunications and Prime Minister Najib Mikati pushed for an even larger price increase.²⁷ With no clear plan to restructure the sector or tackle corruption, the financial burden is left on the user.²⁸

The crisis has also affected residents' ability to access electricity, and frequent power cuts leave people in some areas with only three or four hours of electricity per day (see A1).²⁹ The crisis has particularly impacted at-risk communities such as people living under the poverty line, LGBT+ individuals, and migrants.³⁰

A3 0-6 pts

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

While the government has periodically restricted mobile and internet connectivity in past years, and the Telecommunications Law provides the government with the authority to order internet shutdowns, no restrictions were reported during the coverage period.³¹

The government maintains a monopoly over the internet backbone and over fixed-line and mobile telephone service, and exercises tight control over ISPs. Lebanon has three international border gateways—in Tripoli, Jdeideh, and Beirut—where underwater fiber-optic cables connect the country via the India–Middle East–Western Europe (I-ME-WE), Cadmos, and Berytar cables, respectively.³² The gateways are all operated by OGERO and all ISPs purchase services through OGERO.

Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services are technically restricted under the 2002 Telecommunications Law,³³ but this ban has only been sporadically enforced.³⁴ OGERO installed equipment to block VoIP services in 2010 and used it on a handful of occasions to block the Vonage VoIP service, though not Skype or WhatsApp. However, OGERO stopped blocking Vonage after pressure from businesses, civil society, and politicians.³⁵

A4 0-6 pts

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

The telecommunications industry is government-owned and tightly regulated.³⁶

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 internet backbone, OGERO sets internet prices and collectively manages online subscriptions of private ISPs, including Cyberia, Terranet, Sodetel, and IDM.³⁷

As of 2023, there were 185 privately owned ISPs.³⁸ ISPs currently obtain a permit by decree from the Ministry of Telecommunications,³⁹ and political influence can affect the allocation of contracts to private ISPs and mobile service providers.⁴⁰ The currency collapse has exacerbated financial issues within the ICT sector.

The government has functionally controlled the mobile telecommunications sector since October 2020. Previously, the two government-owned mobile service providers, Alfa and Touch, were provisionally managed by 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 had transferred management of Alfa to the Ministry of Telecommunications. In October 2020, Zain followed suit. As of May 2022, both Alfa and Touch were owned by the state, and no tender was launched during the reporting period.⁴²

In March 2022, Alfa and Touch converted their subscribers' balances from US dollars to Lebanese pounds.⁴³ This was part of a larger strategy to eventually increase prices (see A2). While customers were alerted of this change, the conversion led subscribers to lose most of their balance's value due to the difference between the official exchange rate and the rate set via Sayrafa.⁴⁴

In January 2023, Nabil Bukhalid, the founder and manager of the .lb domain, died, leading the Internet Society's Lebanon chapter to reassure users that the system governing the .lb domain would remain functional. Since 2020, Bukhalid ran the .lb domain at his own expense.⁴⁵ The initial plan was to transfer the administration of the .gov.lb domain to the Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform, although as of June 2023 this transfer had not occurred.⁴⁶

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent 1 / 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 ICT sector.⁴⁷ Overall, the three bodies have limited power and are not considered particularly robust or independent regulators, making the Ministry of Telecommunications the de facto regulator.

The TRA is nominally independent, but in practice, influential political groups hold sway over the institution, often rendering it ineffective.⁴⁸ Former telecommunications ministers have claimed that the TRA has no real authority, given that the law establishing its powers has not yet been implemented.⁴⁹ Since its launch in 2007, many of the TRA's objectives have not been met, including the analog-to-digital transition and the privatization of the ICT sector.

B Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

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

In recent years, the state has started to block more content, often related to gambling, pornography, and Israel, and has not been transparent about its decisions.

The popular LGBT+ dating platform Grindr, which was originally blocked on Alfa and Touch in 2019, remained inaccessible during the coverage period.⁵⁰ Israel-based web-hosting platform Wix has been inaccessible on mobile networks and some ISPs since December 2018 based on a judicial order citing the Israel Boycott Law. Users were not given any advance notice of the blocking.⁵¹

In May 2023, the Union of Public Transport Drivers went on strike and demanded that unregistered rideshare applications, like Bolt, be banned.⁵² In response, the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities addressed a letter to the Ministry of Telecommunications requesting that Bolt be blocked.⁵³ However, the request was denied because it lacked a judicial order.

In May 2020, the prosecutor general 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's Firebase service, which many

developers and entrepreneurs rely on to build applications.⁵⁴ In March 2021, OGERO was asked by the judiciary to block all online platforms offering unofficial currency exchanges. Several other ISPs followed suit, blocking applications and websites that did not reflect the government-approved exchange rate.⁵⁵ It is unclear if these apps remained blocked at the end of the coverage period.

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 2 / delete content, particularly material that is protected by 4 international human rights standards?

Government security officials pressure individuals to remove posts—mainly those criticizing government officials or the army—from social media pages, blogs, and websites. At times the government makes requests to social media platforms to remove content.

Individuals are frequently summoned to appear before the Cybercrimes Bureau and asked to sign a pledge and delete their social media posts. This practice increased during the coverage period, and several high-profile journalists and activists were summoned by the Cybercrimes Bureau. In April 2023, Jean Kassir, the cofounder of Megaphone, and Lara Bitar, the editor in chief of Public Source, were summoned for interrogation and presumably asked to take down online articles that were critical of government officials or policies.⁵⁶ Kassir, who was summoned twice in connection with an article that criticized the public prosecutor, refused to appear and the complaint against him was ultimately withdrawn.⁵⁷ Bitar was summoned after publishing an article that discussed environmental crimes committed by the Lebanese Forces, a militia group active during the 1975–90 civil war.⁵⁸ Bitar also refused to appear.⁵⁹

In April 2023, Nizar Saghieh, a lawyer and cofounder of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Legal Agenda, was summoned to a hearing by the Beirut Bar Association (BBA).⁶⁰ The summons followed Saghieh's online criticism of the BBA's amended code of ethics.⁶¹ In June 2023, after the coverage period, Hayat Mirshad, the cofounder and executive director of feminist organization Fe-Male and the editor in chief of feminist online platform Sharika wa Laken, was summoned by the Beirut Court of Appeals after she was sued for defamation by actor and director Joe Kodeih (see C3).⁶² Although neither Saghieh nor Mirshad appeared at their respective hearings, they were presumably asked to remove the content in question.

In June 2022, Ghassan Rifi, the editor in chief of the Safir al-Shamal news site, was summoned after publishing an article questioning the relationship between a former political candidate in Lebanon and the Israeli government.⁶³ A political analyst, Nidal al-Sabaa, was summoned by the Central Criminal Investigation Office in September 2022 for Twitter posts about former prime minister Saad Hariri.⁶⁴ All were presumably asked to sign a pledge and remove the content in question.

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.

Article 125 of the 2018 Electronic Transactions and Personal Data Law allows the court to order “the suspension of certain electronic services” and to “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.” Article 126 gives the public prosecutor the power to suspend services and accounts and block websites for up to 30 days (see C5).⁶⁵

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 must appeal the blocking within 48 hours in order to have the decision overturned. Grindr was first blocked in January 2019 without a court order (see B1).

Blocking orders are generally rooted in law. Escort service websites, for example, have been blocked in accordance with Articles 523 and 524 of the penal code. Israeli sites have been blocked in accordance with Decree 12562, issued in 1963, which called for the boycotting of Israel, while gambling websites were blocked in accordance with Law 417 of 1995, which gives the Casino du Liban a monopoly on gambling activity within the country. However, some past website blockings have been criticized for the seemingly haphazard manner in which the blocking orders were issued.⁶⁶

In November 2022, the Ministry of Information published a draft media law on its website, though the law has yet to be passed in the parliament.⁶⁷ Despite promises from lawmakers, civil society has not yet been involved in the drafting process.⁶⁸ While the draft prohibits pretrial detention for crimes related to publishing online, including on social media, it contains provisions that criminalize defamation.⁶⁹ In April 2023,

a new draft was made public by the ministry and UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).⁷⁰

In May 2023, US authorities sanctioned and took down 13 Hezbollah-related web domains after Hezbollah was listed as a terrorist organization by the United States. The removed domains included the website of Al Manar TV—which has ties to Hezbollah—as well as online charities affiliated with the Martyrs' Foundation in Lebanon and the Emdad Committee for Islamic Charity. Al Manar's Lebanese domain (.lb) is still accessible.⁷¹

B4 0-4 pts

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

Self-censorship is common in the blogosphere and at 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, including defamation lawsuits, if they post controversial content.

Recent crackdowns on online journalism have increased self-censorship among members of the media (see C3).⁷² Furthermore, the proliferation of anti-LGBT+ hate speech online has led to increased self-censorship within this community, particularly by previously outspoken activists (see C7).⁷³

There has also been increasing self-censorship among lawyers and judges due to recent amendments to the BBA's code of ethics that prevents lawyers and judges from speaking publicly in the media without a prior authorization from the BBA president (see B2).⁷⁴

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

Lebanese media is highly partisan and controlled by the dominant politico-sectarian actors, reflecting Lebanon's political fragmentation. In December 2018, the Samir Kassir Foundation and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 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."⁷⁵

Elite families directly involved in politics own several prominent media outlets.⁷⁶ For example, Parliament speaker Nabih Berri partially owns the National Broadcasting Network (NBN) and its affiliates, while Hezbollah controls a vast network of media outlets. Prominent 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.⁷⁷

Hezbollah is able to manipulate online narratives through content on the websites it owns, which number over 20, as well as through its social media presence, where it disseminates propaganda both within Lebanon and abroad. In October 2022, its social networks shared Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's rhetoric that the death of Mahsa Amini in Iran was a "vague incident" and his attempts to downplay the resulting protests in Iran.⁷⁸

Online disinformation was prevalent ahead of the May 2022 elections. According to a Maharat Foundation survey of social media content ahead of the elections, 49.5 percent of content analyzed included political and sectarian propaganda from political actors (see B8).⁷⁹ Specifically, Hezbollah's "electronic army" flagged comments and spammed articles deemed critical of the group and its leaders, at times resulting in the content being removed.⁸⁰

The armed wing of Hezbollah continues to spread disinformation and propaganda online, targeting both Lebanese and international audiences.⁸¹ An investigation by the *Telegraph*, which it reported on in 2020, found that the network, which receives support from Iran, orchestrates defamation campaigns against opponents of Hezbollah and teaches its members how to create inauthentic social media profiles, doctor pictures, spread propaganda, and avoid censorship by social media companies.⁸² The network has also been responsible for a number of cyberattacks across the region (see C8).⁸³

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 to achieve sustainability due to Lebanon's relatively weak digital advertising market, as most advertising revenue is absorbed by television and other traditional media. Obstacles to boosting the digital advertising market include Lebanon's slow and unreliable internet services and the ongoing economic crisis.⁸⁴

Under the Press Law, it is "forbidden to issue a press publication without first obtaining a license." Obtaining a license is difficult and expensive in practice, however.⁸⁵

Outlets with formal or informal ties to politicians or powerful figures are financially more viable than those without connections.⁸⁶

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).⁸⁷ However, several 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 gray zone and has been subject to censorship (see B1).

Channels and accounts dedicated to sexual health awareness have been blocked or restricted on social media, sparking controversy about sex education online and offline (see B2).⁸⁸ A popular drag performer's Instagram account was banned and later restored following a campaign to support the account owner. Individuals and groups advocating for LGBT+ rights practice self-censorship at times so as not to lose their social media accounts (see B4).⁸⁹

Social media is popular in Lebanon, and many news outlets have created dedicated social media pages to reach broader audiences.⁹⁰ In 2021, the launch of the audio-only social media app Clubhouse allowed online users in Lebanon to debate and discuss social, political, and economic reforms in the country—topics that are rarely covered transparently in traditional media.⁹¹ However, some users have reported that they were targeted with harassment—including death threats—on the app for sharing anti-Hezbollah views (see C7).⁹²

The economic crisis has led to the closure of several prominent outlets, limiting the diversity of online content. For example, the *Daily Star* stopped its traditional and online operations in 2021.⁹³

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users' ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues?

5 / 6

In recent years, NGOs and individual actors have used the internet as a primary or secondary tool to extend the reach of their national awareness-raising campaigns.

In 2022, social media played an important role for political discussion and mobilization ahead of Lebanon's parliamentary elections. According to a Maharat Foundation survey of social media content ahead of the

elections, 43 percent of 100 surveyed female candidates were subject to online harassment (see C7).⁹⁴

State actors have also been limiting lawyers and judges' freedom of expression online. The recent amendment to BBA's code of ethics prevents lawyers from speaking publicly in the media without a prior authorization from the BBA president.⁹⁵

In 2020, Lebanese people took to social media to campaign and mobilize around a number of causes, most notably following the Beirut port explosion. After the explosion—and the revelation of government corruption and mismanagement that led to it—the hashtag [#علقوا_المشائق](#) (“hang the nooses”) was used to demand accountability from Lebanon's ruling parties.⁹⁶ However, as online mobilization turned to in-person protests, authorities reportedly monitored online spaces, such as social networking sites and messaging services, to limit antigovernment demonstrations.⁹⁷

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 information, and press freedom, 2 / including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary 6 that 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 code of justice place restrictions on freedom of expression (see C2). The judiciary also lacks independence, as it is subject to considerable political influence.⁹⁸

Other issues persist. While Lebanon passed a law on the right to access information in 2017,⁹⁹ state agencies rarely comply. For example, when the Gherbal Initiative, a Lebanese NGO, sent access-to-information requests to 133 administrations, they received just 34 responses.¹⁰⁰

In August 2020, after the Beirut port explosion, the Lebanese parliament approved a two-week state of emergency.¹⁰¹ The designation afforded the government broad powers, including the ability to set curfews, ban gatherings, and censor publications that threaten national security.¹⁰²

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under 2 / 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.¹⁰³

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.¹⁰⁴ Because the Publications Law does not explicitly refer to electronic publishing and websites, there is some confusion about what forms of online speech are subject to restriction under the law. The Publications Court has considered journalists' social media posts to fall under its jurisdiction, even as other courts and nonjudicial bodies have prosecuted journalists for articles they had written. However, the Publications Court decided that other social media posts are not subject to the regulations relating to the Publications Law, but rather to the penal code, which contains fewer protections for individuals.¹⁰⁵

The authorities prosecute legitimate online speech using 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.

During the coverage period, the head of the BBA called on the criminal courts to investigate cases of defamation, libel, slander, insults, and purportedly false news (see C3). He also announced the formation of a media committee in the BBA tasked with examining draft laws for current developments and technologies.¹⁰⁶

C3 0-6 pts

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

A significant crackdown on online freedom of expression began in late 2017 and intensified during the coverage period.¹⁰⁷

Authorities used criminal defamation laws to silence government criticism during the coverage period and the public prosecutor ordered security forces to detain internet users, in violation of the current Publications Law (see C2).¹⁰⁸ In July 2022, an officer in the General Directorate of the Internal Security Forces, Michel Motran, criticized the traffic control office in a Facebook post and was summoned by the Information Division of the Internal Security Forces and held in jail for 10 days.¹⁰⁹

High-profile activists and journalists are frequently summoned to the Cybercrimes Bureau in retaliation for their online content. In April 2023, Jean Kassir, the cofounder of Megaphone, and Lara Bitar, the editor in chief of Public Source, were summoned for interrogation, although both refused to appear.¹¹⁰ Both Kassir and Bitar were summoned over recent articles they published that were deemed critical of government agencies or policies (see B2).¹¹¹

In April 2023, lawyer Nizar Saghiey was summoned to a hearing by the BBA following his criticism of the amendment to organization's code of ethics.¹¹² In June 2023, after the coverage period, Hayat Mirshad, the editor in chief of Sharika wa Laken, was summoned by the Beirut Court of Appeals after the online platform campaigned to boycott a play by Joe Kodeih, who has been accused of harassment by multiple women and girls (see B2).¹¹³

In November 2021, Radwan Mortada, a journalist working for *Al-Akhbar*, was sentenced to a year in prison in absentia by a Beirut military court. Mortada was charged with "defamation against the military institution" after criticizing the Lebanese military in his reporting for *Al-Akhbar*.¹¹⁴

C4 0-4 pts

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

The government requires registration for prepaid SIM cards and has considered introducing biometric registration.¹¹⁵

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.¹¹⁶ 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.¹¹⁷

In May 2023, SMEX reported that mobile service provider Touch was enforcing a strict policy regarding identification documents needed to buy a new SIM card. According to the policy, purchasing a SIM card will require a valid ID, a residential address, and a photo of the customer taken at the site of sale. This policy limits nonresidents, such as Lebanon's many refugees, from purchasing SIM cards.¹¹⁸

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' 3 / right to privacy? 6

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 because although authorities likely have the ability to conduct mass online surveillance, there have been no reported cases in recent years.

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.¹¹⁹

Article 14 of the constitution "ensures the inviolability of the home," but it is unclear if this law applies to private communications.¹²⁰ The

Telecommunications Interception Act of 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 monitor communications if a judge grants government agencies access, or if the Ministry of Interior or Ministry of Defense submits a request to the prime minister for matters related to “combating terrorism, state security, or crimes related to state security.”¹²¹

Lebanese authorities are believed to have access to spyware. 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.¹²² In 2021, reporting by the *Washington Post* found that Pegasus spyware was used to target and spy on politicians, journalists, and influencers in Lebanon, most notably former prime minister Saad Hariri and Lama Fakih, a journalist working on the Beirut port explosion investigation.¹²³

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.¹²⁴

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 General Directorate for General Security (GDGS) building in Beirut, targeting military personnel, government officials, activists, journalists, and lawyers in 21 countries.¹²⁵ The operation relied on a unique mobile surveillance tool, dubbed Pallas, which was able to extract hundreds of gigabytes of data from Android devices and desktop devices. Using spear-phishing tactics, Dark Caracal sent malware-laden Facebook and WhatsApp URLs to users that allowed attackers to extract messages and phone calls, download applications, monitor calls, and upload files onto Android devices.

Security agencies have also used surveillance technologies such as FinFisher and International Mobile Subscriber Identity (IMSI) catchers.¹²⁶ 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.

During protests in 2019, Internal Security Forces (ISF) officers infiltrated protesters’ WhatsApp groups and made arrests based on information shared in these groups.¹²⁷ There were also 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.¹²⁸

Authorities have increasingly employed biometric technologies. The GDGS adopted biometric passports in 2016,¹²⁹ and a year later, the government announced that it would begin issuing biometric residence permits to foreigners (see C4).¹³⁰ Additionally, intelligence agencies have links to different politicians or parties, and in turn their own agendas, which has led to privacy violations. Without a strong data protection law, it is unclear if biometric data could be used to increase surveillance (see C6).¹³¹

C6 0-6 pts

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

Lebanon does not have comprehensive data protection laws and the government's ownership and control over ISPs could facilitate unlawful data collection (see A4).

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.¹³² Article 97 gives the defense, interior, health, and justice ministers 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.¹³³

In May 2023, SMEX executive director Mohamad Najem claimed that the government was pressuring the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to provide all the data it has on refugees in Lebanon, including biometric data.¹³⁴ As of June 2023, the government and UNHCR have not reached an agreement on this request.

At times the government requests user account information from major social media companies.¹³⁵ 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.

In October 2021, the prime minister formed a committee of ministries to investigate the possibility of “granting security agencies and armed forces full access to all telecommunication data.” The reason behind this potential move remains unclear, however activists raised the alarm at the possibility of security agencies accessing this data given the GDGS’s history of surveillance through operation Dark Caracal (see C5).¹³⁶

C7 0-5 pts

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

Journalists and ordinary citizens sometimes face intimidation for their online comments. Political parties and armed groups have been known to target their critics through online harassment campaigns, which have at times led to offline attacks.¹³⁷

High-profile journalists and activists have been victims of harassment, which at times escalates to physical violence, in retaliation for their online content. In August 2022, freelance online photojournalist Hasan Chaaban was physically harassed by Hezbollah supporters in retaliation for his coverage of the Beit Yahoun protests, which included reporting that criticized the Hezbollah-aligned Amal Movement and Hezbollah. Chaaban received death threats and a bullet was left on his car window, reportedly as a threat to leave Beit Yahoun.¹³⁸ Also in August, journalist Dima Sadek was subject to harassment campaigns orchestrated by Hezbollah supporters, which included death threats, rape threats, and violent online harassment. Sadek was most recently targeted after posting a social media post in support of Salman Rushdie and his controversial book, *The Satanic Verses*.¹³⁹

Another online defamation campaign on social media was launched against the judge assigned to investigate the Beirut port explosion. Supporters of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement orchestrated a smear campaign to “electronically assassinate” judge Tarek Bitar after he summoned and accused two Hezbollah politicians of being involved in the blast.¹⁴⁰

Ordinary social media users, particularly women and LGBT+ individuals, have experienced online harassment and doxing.¹⁴¹ For example, Dalia Ahmad, a journalist for independent television station Al Jadeed, received racist threats from online trolls after she criticized Lebanese political leaders, including Hezbollah’s Hassan Nasrallah.¹⁴²

During the coverage period, a right-wing Christian group called the “Soldiers of God”¹⁴³ spread hate messages online targeting the LGBT+ community, specifically through their YouTube channel. The group was initially formed in 2020, although its ideology has gained followers in recent years. In its online campaigns, the group praises conversion

therapy and advocates for the mass murder of LGBT+ individuals. Their influence, both online and offline, led Internal Security Minister Bassam Mawlawi to issue an order banning all LGBT+ public gatherings.¹⁴⁴

While not common, physical violence over online content has occurred in the past. In February 2021, political activist and publisher Lokman Slim was assassinated, allegedly for his political views and critiques of Lebanese political parties and militias. Slim was a prominent Hezbollah critic and received death threats from the group in 2019, although no group took responsibility for his murder.¹⁴⁵ He was active on social media and was frequently quoted and interviewed by online news outlets.¹⁴⁶

C8 0-3 pts

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

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

In November 2022, the user data of over 1.8 million Lebanese WhatsApp users was leaked and sold on the dark web.¹⁴⁷ Microsoft detected malicious activity originating from the Lebanon-based group Polonium, and their activity was reportedly coordinated with actors from Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security.¹⁴⁸

In recent years, the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has provided Hezbollah with sophisticated cyberattack technology. Hezbollah's "electronic army" has gathered intelligence on Lebanese government institutions and has orchestrated cyberattacks against financial institutions in Lebanon and abroad.¹⁴⁹ In 2021, a group of hackers linked to Hezbollah breached 250 servers in different countries, including Lebanon, and stole sensitive data. According to cybersecurity reports, the hackers relied on a custom, remote-access virus, and their victims included individuals, companies, and institutions.¹⁵⁰

Suspected Iranian hackers targeted Lebanese internet users through a variety of malware attacks. In one case, the attackers sent information about job opportunities that would deploy malware once the user clicked the infected link.¹⁵¹ While it is unclear who the specific targets of this attack were, it is suspected that the Iranian hacking group was targeting financial, energy, telecommunications, and government institutions.

A committee of ministry, military, intelligence, and private-sector representatives was established in November 2018 and tasked with presenting recommendations to the parliament on establishing a national cybersecurity agency.¹⁵² In 2019, a committee was formed to handle the implementation of the cybersecurity strategy until the creation of the

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