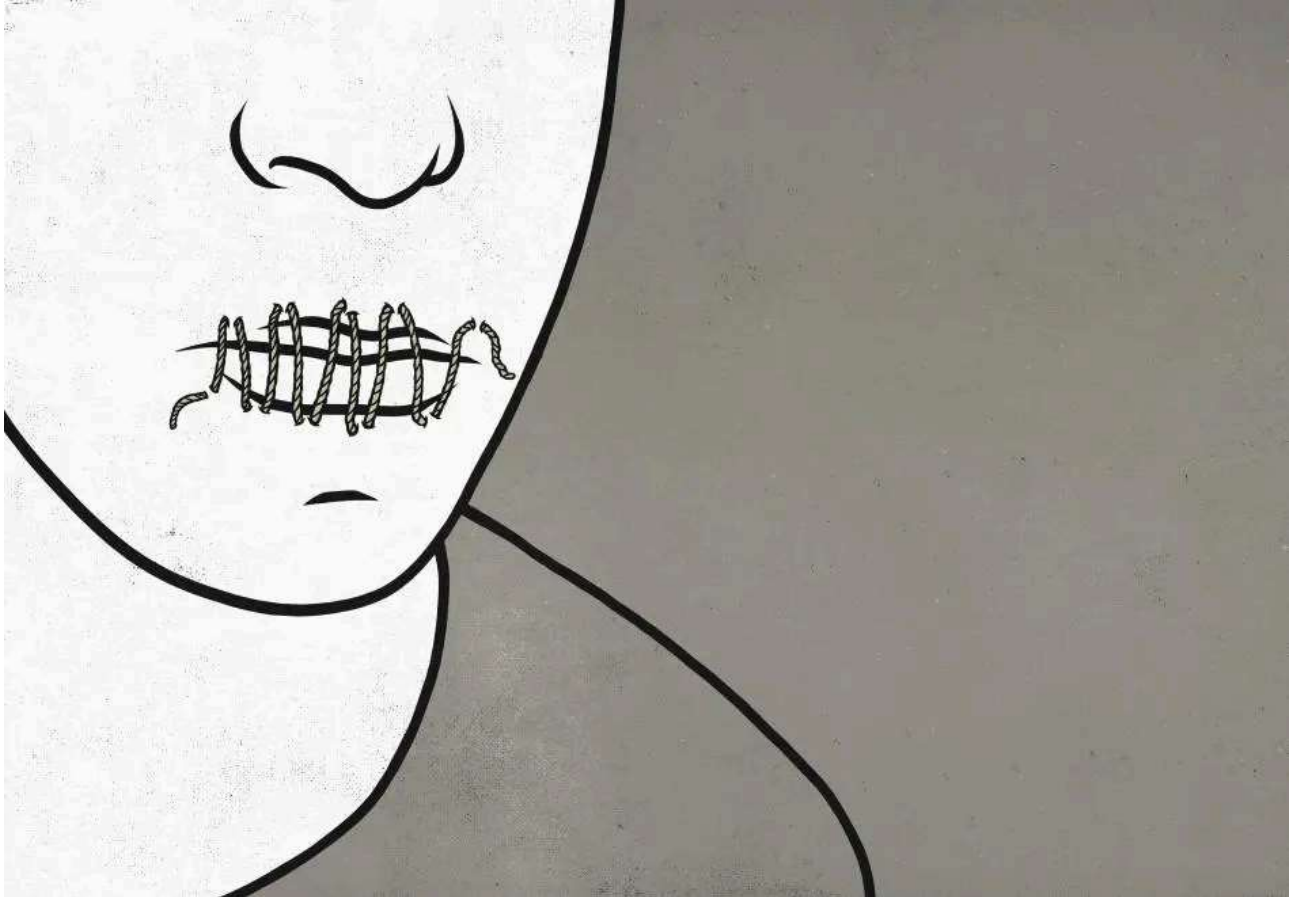


Jordan: Security Forces Target LGBT Activists

Systematic Crackdown on Organizing; Official Intimidation, Interrogations



[Click to expand Image](#)

Illustration of string sealing person's lips. © 2020 Malte Mueller / Getty Images

The authorities in [Jordan](#) have systematically targeted lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights activists and coordinated an unlawful crackdown on free expression and assembly around gender and sexuality, Human Rights Watch said today.

Human Rights Watch documented cases in which Jordan's General Intelligence Department (GID) and the Preventive Security department of the Public Security Directorate interrogated LGBT activists about their work, and intimidated them with threats of violence, arrest, and prosecution, forcing several activists to shut down their organizations, discontinue their activities, and in some cases, flee the country. Government officials also smeared LGBT rights activists online based on their sexual orientation, and social media users posted photos of LGBT rights activists with messages inciting violence against them.

“Jordanian authorities have launched a coordinated attack against LGBT rights activists, aimed at eradicating any discussion around gender and sexuality from the public and private spheres,” said [Rasha Younes](#), senior LGBT rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Security forces’ intimidation tactics and unlawful interference in LGBT organizing have driven activism further underground and forced civil society leaders into an impossible reality: severe self-censorship or fleeing Jordan.”

Human Rights Watch interviewed 13 LGBT rights activists in Jordan, as well as an owner of a cultural center in Amman where an LGBT event was cancelled due to official intimidation, and an alternative media initiative's director who was targeted online. Human Rights Watch also reviewed statements by government officials, nongovernmental organizations, and individuals, as well as visual media provided by activists documenting incidents of online harassment against them in public social media posts.

All those interviewed said security forces, particularly the intelligence agency, repeatedly sought to intimidate them, including by summoning them for interrogation on several occasions. Three activists said the Amman governor interrogated them after they preemptively cancelled the screening of a film depicting gay men. Two LGBT organization directors said that because of official intimidation, they were forced to close their offices, discontinue their operations in Jordan, and flee the country.

One activist said Preventive Security officers made him sign a pledge that he would report all his venue's activities to the governor. Another activist reported being targeted online while social media users called for him to be burned alive.

While Jordanian authorities' [targeting of civic space](#) is not unique to LGBT rights activists, the combination of a legally precarious situation, including the application of [vague "morality" provisions](#) against LGBT people, and social marginalization, quells LGBT expression online and offline. Despite the [absence of explicit laws that criminalize same-sex relations](#) in Jordan, there is also no legislation protecting LGBT people from discrimination, in a situation of widespread antagonism toward LGBT people. The combination of vague morality laws, public hostility, and the absence of legal protection, appears to give license to security forces and private individuals to target LGBT people with impunity.

In August 2023, Jordanian authorities promulgated a [new repressive cybercrime law](#) that further undermines free speech online, threatens internet users' right to anonymity, and introduces new authority to control social media. It includes provisions that [could be used](#) by authorities to target digital content around gender and sexuality, as well as individuals who use digital platforms to advocate for the rights of LGBT people. An activist told Human Rights Watch that the new law will "destroy all forms of LGBT expression online" and intensify "interference in people's private lives."

In a 2023 report, Human Rights Watch [documented](#) the far-reaching offline consequences of online targeting against LGBT people in Jordan, including entrapment, online extortion, online harassment, and reliance on illegitimately obtained digital information based on arbitrary phone searches in prosecutions. As a result of digital targeting, LGBT people in Jordan said they felt unable to safely express themselves, and that LGBT rights activism has subsequently suffered.

All LGBT rights activists interviewed reported [detrimental consequences](#) in the aftermath of being targeted by the authorities, even when the threats did not materialize beyond intimidation. Most activists preemptively shut down their initiatives and groups, fearing prosecution.

A director of an LGBT rights organization said he was forced to shut down the group in January following what he described as an "unprecedented, coordinated attack" by the authorities. "We [my boyfriend and I] had to leave everything behind – our work, our friends, our families, our memories – and flee the country," he said. "It is terrifying what influence they [security forces] can have with intimidation alone, without having to lift a finger. They upended our lives, under threat, and the scariest part was that we knew they would do everything they threatened if we ever returned home."

Another activist described his predicament: "Our only option was to stop our operations, to avoid imminent prosecution, and flee Jordan. The relentless government pressure over the years, which increased alongside our visibility as queer activists, is what fractured our political movement and activism. Intimidation is the most powerful tool of government repression in Jordan."

One of the few LGBT rights activists who has remained in Jordan described her current reality: “Merely existing in Amman has become terrifying. We cannot continue our work as activists, and we are forced to be hyperaware of our surroundings as individuals.”

Under international human rights law, freedom of expression, assembly, and association are recognized as fundamental human rights, often [overlapping](#) and essential to the effective functioning of a democratic society, and to the enjoyment of other individual rights. The [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), to which Jordan is a state party, [guarantees](#) fundamental human rights, including free expression, assembly, and association, as well as equal protection of the law, all without discrimination.

Jordan’s international partners, including the [United States](#) and [European Union](#), which provide direct assistance and training to Jordan’s security agencies, should publicly and explicitly condemn security force violations relating to freedom of expression, association, and assembly, including against LGBT people, and should ensure that respect for such freedoms is a condition of all existing programs.

“Despite state repression, LGBT activism will continue in Jordan and civil society’s resistance will not be stopped,” Younes said. “Jordanian authorities should safeguard the rights of everyone, including by protecting freedom of expression, assembly, and association, as well as the privacy of digital communications.”

Crackdown on LGBT Organizing, Official Intimidation, Harassment

Security agencies, primarily the intelligence agency, have arbitrarily and without clear legal basis targeted LGBT rights activists and organizations with official intimidation and harassment over the past year.

In January the intelligence agency closed the bank account and ordered the closure of an organization that had been operating since 2018 to provide safe spaces and services for LGBT people. It was registered as a company due to the government’s refusal to allow its registration as a nongovernmental organization. Human Rights Watch interviewed the organization’s director, who fled Jordan under threat of violence and prosecution. He said:

On January 4, I received a phone call from the bank where our organization’s account receives funds under my name, and they informed me that I had one hour to submit all the organization’s paperwork, or they would close the account. I requested more time, as I could not deliver around 60 documents in an hour, but they refused. They sent me an email, which included the names of all the organization’s beneficiaries, donors, and employees. After the hour deadline, the bank called me to inform me that our account had been closed.

The activist said that the following day, he received a phone call from an official who said he was calling on behalf of a committee comprising representatives of the Interior, Labor, and Commerce Ministries, informing him they would be visiting the group’s office imminently and instructing him to be there. The activist said:

I rushed to the office in complete panic and tried to clear the space from any visuals, files, or evidence of the nature of our work. When the three ministry representatives arrived, they inquired about the organization’s employees and beneficiaries. They handed me a legal document with a list of demands, which included that we deliver all our funding sources, our social media accounts, website, and all the training and internal modules that guide our work, within 10 days.

The activist said that the legal document he received stated that the committee had formed in November 2022. The activist said that he had received indications that the order to shut down the organization had been made by the intelligence agency:

I was in utter terror. I had to change my residence, where I lived with my boyfriend, because I knew we were being monitored and feared an attack. I realized that this attack was coordinated and much bigger than me and that the GID had been watching me and monitoring the organization's operations for a while.

A few days later, the activist said, he went back to his apartment to pick up some clothes and as soon as he walked in, his phone started ringing incessantly. He picked it up when he got worried, he said, and the caller identified himself as a security officer and said, "Your car has been involved in a major accident. You need to come to the police station immediately."

The activist said the security officer knew his name and car license plate number, but his car was parked outside the apartment, so he refused to go to the police station. "The security officer began screaming and threatening me with arrest if I did not go to the police station," the activist said. He added that he became fearful when the officer said he would bring him to the station by force, because he had been abducted from the street in 2015 by intelligence officers, who interrogated him for two days about his work, verbally abused him, outed him to his family, and threatened to arrest and beat him. He said:

I left the apartment, all of my belongings, and my car behind and ran in the street as fast as I could. I hid in a garage and called a trusted contact. When he arrived to pick me up, I turned off my phone, which had not stopped ringing. But every time I would turn it off, it would turn back on and ring. I had to leave my phone behind because I figured it was hacked and I was being tracked.

The next day, the activist said that he and his boyfriend had to relocate abroad: "We arrived in a foreign country without any plan or support. We had no choice. Since I fled Jordan, I consistently wake up screaming in terror. It has been the hardest experience I have ever been through."

In a similar incident, an activist from another LGBT rights organization said he found out that its bank account was blocked when he tried to send a routine payment from a foreign bank account to Jordan and was informed by the local bank that the account had been frozen by the central bank, and that the bank was instructed not to allow him to make any transactions.

Later, the activist said he was stopped by an intelligence officer, who showed him his ID and told the activist to get in the car: "He drove around for [approximately]45 minutes, during which he asked me about my work and the money the organization receives. He warned me that organized political work without registration is criminalized." "We know about the details of your work and your affiliation with embassies. Just know that we have our eyes on you and that you need to stop this work, or we will pursue legal action," the activist said the officer told him.

Two days later, the activist said, intelligence officers visited his father's house to inquire about the activist's "human rights work." An intelligence agent told the activist's father, "Tell your son, he should take good care of himself," the activist said.

As a result of intimidation, leaders of the organization, which had been operating in Jordan for over eight years, felt they had no option but to discontinue its operations, including services for LGBT people, and delete all online content. After consulting with a lawyer, the activist said he learned that the organization would be facing charges pertaining to money laundering if it continued to operate as an unregistered nongovernmental organization.

"The goal is to intimidate us so that we continue to stick to the margins," the activist said. "Since the organization closed, I have fled Jordan and have since been living in exile."

More recently, in October, an LGBT rights activist said he was summoned for investigation by the intelligence agency. During the interrogation, the activist said intelligence officers searched his phone, intimidated him, and threatened him with a travel ban, while asking personal questions

about his sexual orientation and sexual relations with other men. After three hours of questioning, the activist said the officers told him he could leave.

“They [Jordanian authorities] invest in intimidation to destroy our minds and isolate us,” the activist said. “Their tactic is to target us mentally, leaving no evidence of our torment behind.”

Government Censorship of LGBT Content

On June 19, activists had to preemptively cancel a media initiative’s private film screening at a cultural center in Amman, after the event’s details were leaked on social media and shared with two government officials who in turn shared it more widely and called on the authorities to ban the event because it “promotes homosexuality.” The film screening depicted a romantic relationship between two young men, activists said. Human Rights Watch interviewed the media initiative’s director as well as its operations officer. She said:

We sent an invitation and poster with the event details on a private mailing list with trusted members. The invitation was leaked and contained the personal details of a colleague, as well as his contact information, and the time and place of the event. Preventive Security called our colleague whose personal information was published and summoned him for interrogation before the governor.

The media initiative’s director said they halted all their activities and took down their social media pages due to surveillance threats and intimidation.

Human Rights Watch also spoke to the owner of the site where the film screening was supposed to be held, which hosts cultural events. He said:

After the event details were leaked, we were surprised to see threatening comments about the venue on our Facebook and Google pages. The comments included threats to destroy the venue while calling its employees “enemies of God.” I issued a statement clarifying the venue’s position, and we decided to close the venue until further notice for the security of its employees.

Unlawful Interrogations

The owner of the cultural center said that after the event was cancelled, Preventive Security officials working with the Amman governorate called the owner and summoned him for investigation. At the same time, the owner said a group of security officers who did not identify themselves arrived at the site, took the IDs of everyone there, and began questioning the employees after they took the IDs of everyone who was present.

The next day, Preventive Security officers demanded that the site issue a statement condemning homosexuality in accordance with Jordanian society’s values and morals, and threatened violence if it wasn’t published the same day, the owner said:

We asked for security forces’ protection from the attacks against us, and they said, “You deserve whatever they will do to you. We have been monitoring your venue’s activities with disdain for a while. You have committed a huge mistake, and it is our duty to discipline you.”

The owner said that after the governor interrogated him, he was forced to sign a pledge that the cultural site would submit a notice to the governor’s office containing details of the planned activities ahead of every upcoming event. If they failed to do so, the pledge stated that they would be “subject to the harshest punishment possible.” He said:

During my questioning, the governor repeatedly said that “homosexuality is a perverted disease that we must protect society from.” Since then, every time I go to the governor’s

office to submit an effective notice about an event, I get interrogated at length about the event content, its attendees, and previous events they had found on social media. This is causing severe disruption to our work. They treat us like a threat to national security, like we are the enemy.

In October 2022, the intelligence agency summoned the director and the operations officer of a registered human rights organization in Amman for investigation. The group had organized private workshops on gender and sexuality in July and August 2022, which they circulated more widely in October, without announcing them on social media, the director said. A few days before another workshop was to be held, the director said the intelligence agency informed her that they received a report about the workshops, falsely claiming that they were aimed at promoting “sexual deviance,” “incitement to homosexuality,” “sex before marriage,” and “sexual relations with animals.”

Notwithstanding the false accusations against the group, the employees said, the intelligence agency knew everything about the organization’s activities, including details about its private gatherings, its WhatsApp group, and its private Zoom meetings. The intelligence officers accused the two employees of “inciting homosexuality,” and told them they had to obtain permission to hold any workshop around gender and sexuality, they said.

The facilitator said that the officers asked her private and inappropriate questions about her sex life and were “most concerned about homosexuality,” and said that they “will not allow the discussion of such topics in Jordan in order to preserve the status quo.” After a long investigation that included intimidation and threats of violence and deportation, the two employees decided to cancel the workshops and stop the group’s operations within Jordan.

Online Harassment and Doxxing

An LGBT rights activist living in Jordan said he has been subjected to an online smear campaign since June 2023, when social media users, including politicians and a member of parliament, shared his photo and personal information with comments ridiculing him, accusing him of “spreading homosexuality,” and calling for his deportation and arrest, while other social media users called for him to be “burned alive.” He said:

I was terrified and shut down my social media accounts. I reported the content to the relevant platforms, but some of it is still publicly available and has not been removed. I could not report the individuals to the authorities, because in their eyes, I am guilty and afforded no legal protection.

Separately, the organizer of the site where the June film screening was supposed to be held said that when news about the nature of the film was leaked, the site immediately faced an unprecedented attack on traditional and social media, with dozens of threats of violence, including death threats, on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Online harassment has far-reaching offline consequences for the safety, livelihood, and mental health of targeted LGBT people. [As a result of online harassment](#), LGBT people have lost their jobs, suffered family violence, received death threats, been forced to change their residence and phone numbers and delete their social media accounts, fled the country due to ongoing risk of persecution, and suffered severe mental health consequences.

Cybercrime Laws

In August, Jordan’s parliament overhauled the country’s cybercrime law, quickly passing [a set of amendments](#) without meaningful public debate or opportunity for feedback or criticism, and passed [a new repressive cybercrime law](#) that further undermines free speech online.

The law uses imprecise, vague, and undefined terminology. Specifically, articles 13 and 14 of the 2023 law punish the production, distribution, or consumption of “pornographic content,” which is

undefined, and content “promoting, instigating, aiding or inciting immorality,” with at least six months in prison and a fine.

Although LGBT behavior is not specifically named, past experience gives serious cause for concern that the authorities could use the amendments as a weapon to [target](#) digital content around gender and sexuality, and people who use digital platforms to advocate for the rights of LGBT people. The law also threatens internet users’ right to anonymity, which many [LGBT people use to shield themselves online](#), effectively forcing people to choose between keeping their identity secure and freely expressing their opinions.

Jordanian authorities have used cybercrime laws in the past to target LGBT people, intimidate activists, and [censor content around gender and sexuality](#). A gay man from Jordan whom Human Rights Watch interviewed was sentenced to six months in prison in 2021 based on a provision in the 2015 cybercrime law that criminalized “promoting prostitution online,” after he sought protection from the authorities from online extortion.

Jordan’s Legal Obligations

Jordan’s abuses against LGBT people and activists violate their basic rights, including their right to privacy, free movement, free expression, assembly, and association, including on the internet, as well as their right to nondiscrimination and protection under the law. The abuses violate Jordan’s constitution and international treaties to which Jordan is a party.

Jordan’s [constitution](#) protects the rights to nondiscrimination (article 6), the right to personal freedom (article 7), and the right to freedom of expression and opinion (article 15).

The [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), to which Jordan is a state party, provides that everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression, assembly, and association. The ICCPR, in its articles 2 and 26, [guarantees](#) fundamental human rights and equal protection of the law without discrimination. The United Nations Human Rights Committee, which interprets the covenant, has made [clear](#) that discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is prohibited in upholding any of the rights protected by the treaty, including freedom of expression, assembly, and association.

In addition, the [Arab Charter on Human Rights](#), to which Jordan is a state party, guarantees in its article 32 “the right to information and freedom of opinion and expression, as well as the right to receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of geographical boundaries.”

Recommendations

To the Government

- Prohibit security forces from targeting people based on their suspected sexual orientation or gender identity or their activism around the rights of LGBT people.
- Protect freedom of expression online and offline, as well as the privacy of internet communications.
- Prosecute security officials who violate laws related to surveillance, arbitrary searches, and unlawful invasion of privacy.
- Investigate and hold accountable people who make online or offline statements that incite or threaten violence against LGBT people.

To Security Forces

- Stop targeting and intimidating civil society activists, including LGBT people.
- Refrain from violating people’s privacy during investigations, including by asking for their phones or social media accounts.

- Ensure that people have access to legal representation during interrogations in police custody, including informing them of their right to a lawyer and providing one without charge upon request.
- Safeguard the right of LGBT people to report crimes without risk of arrest, and ensure that no crime victim is denied assistance, arrested, or harassed based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Stop requiring groups to obtain advance approval to hold events in privately owned spaces.

To the Parliament

- Examine vague “morality” provisions of the penal code that could justify the arbitrary arrest or harassment of people due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression; or be used to prevent civil society from addressing taboo or stigmatized issues, and repeal, modify, or otherwise ensure that such provisions are not applied in manner contrary to international human rights law.
- Repeal the 2023 Cybercrime Law, or otherwise modify vague and abusive provisions that threaten free expression and the right to privacy.
- Pass comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation that prohibits discrimination, including online, on the grounds of sex, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation; and includes effective measures to identify and address such discrimination.

To Jordan’s International Partners

- Publicly and explicitly condemn all security force violations in Jordan relating to freedom of expression, association, and assembly, including against LGBT people.
- Ensure that respect for such freedoms is a condition of all existing programs.
- Push for and track concrete reforms in these areas.