



Jordan: Media Rights Group Threatened Over Funding

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Jordanian authorities have threatened a regional media freedom organization based in [Jordan](#) over its receipt of foreign funding, Human Rights Watch said today.

Jordanian authorities told the [Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists \(CDFJ\)](#) that its registration category prohibits it from receiving foreign funding under government rules. But prior to 2017 the organization operated without incident or official complaint for 19 years. The group works on behalf of journalists detained across the region and hosts annual workshops and events on media freedom.

"Broadsideing a media freedom watchdog is the latest example of Jordan's threats against foreign funding for local organizations working on rights issues," said [Sarah Leah Whitson](#), Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "The Jordanian authorities' treatment of this media freedom group indicates that they view some nongovernmental organizations as enemies that must be controlled rather than as partners in improving the country's human rights situation."

On August 28, 2017, Jordan's Companies Control Department issued memos both to the organization and to the attorney general stating that the group had violated the country's 1997 Law on Companies by receiving foreign funding while registered as a "civil company" rather than a "nonprofit company." The journalism group says, however, that the regulation does not specifically prohibit civil companies from receiving foreign funds. The semi-governmental *al-Dustour* daily newspaper published the memo and a [front-page article](#) criticizing the journalism group on September 10, before it received the memo.

The memo orders the group to halt reception of any foreign or domestic funding and to refrain from stating that the organization is a nonprofit company.

The group's executive director, Nidal Mansour, told Human Rights Watch that he was surprised to read about the Companies Control Department memo in the newspaper before receiving it himself, stating that his organization had been cooperating with the department since it opened an inquiry into the group's operations in March. He said that the organization has never attempted to hide the fact that it receives foreign funding for its projects, and that prominent government officials have participated in these events over the years. The journalism group [denied all allegations of wrongdoing](#) in a statement published on September 11.

The *al-Dustour* daily followed its initial article with an [editorial](#) on September 11 under the byline "national affairs editor" that said that organizations that receive foreign funding are disloyal to Jordan and a threat to the country. It states, "It is certain that some of these centers receive funding from foreign embassies or external foundations in order to serve their goals or programs, which represent a clear intervention into the affairs of our country and a threat to its political and social security."

The move against the journalism group could place dozens of organizations registered as companies at risk of similar treatment, Human Rights Watch said. The laws require organizations registered as associations under the country's 2008 Law on Associations or nonprofit companies under the Law on Companies to seek high-level government approval before receiving any foreign funding.

These restrictions became more onerous in October 2015, when Jordan's council of ministers implemented a [foreign funding control mechanism](#). Under this system, nongovernmental groups are required to submit foreign funding approval requests to the Social Development Ministry. The groups must provide extensive information about the project to be supported by the funding, demonstrating how it accords with Jordan's national and developmental goals, and how it connects to the Jordan Response Plan for Syrian refugees. Authorities are not required to provide any justification for rejecting such funding.

Jordanian authorities have justified the new measures by saying they needed to better organize the country's nongovernmental sector and avoid duplication of work by various groups. The foreign funding control mechanism, however, effectively gives Jordanian authorities the ability to choose what projects groups are permitted to carry out, undermining their ability to function free of disproportionate government interference.

Since the imposition of the foreign funding mechanism, local groups told Human Rights Watch, in practice all foreign funding must be approved by the Social Development Ministry, the Council of Ministers, the Planning and International Cooperation Ministry, and any other ministry linked with a project. The groups said that the approvals can take weeks or months, and that if any government body in the chain of approval rejects the project the funding is rejected.

The Social Development Ministry proposed further amendments to the Law on Associations in 2016 that would have further [restricted receipt of foreign funding](#). The amendments would have required associations that receive foreign funding to submit a separate report and budget for each approved grant in addition to other reporting requirements.

The amendments also would have required depositing any foreign funds for which groups are seeking approval in a "safe account" under the "associations fund," to be administered by the Social Development Ministry. It is unclear whether a foreign donor would be able to recover a grant if the authorities turned down a funding request. Jordanian authorities have yet to take the amendments forward.

As a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Jordan is obligated to uphold the right to freedom of association. Selective application of vague laws regulating nongovernmental groups, as in the media freedom group's case, violates this obligation and restricts the work of these groups in Jordan, Human Rights Watch said.

In his 2014 annual report to the UN secretary-general, the UN special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association [criticized increasing restrictions](#) around the world on foreign funds for nongovernmental groups. The special rapporteur said that countries "do not generally object to corporations investing capital from foreign sources in their jurisdictions in the same way they do if civil society organizations receive foreign funding."

"Jordan should stop using foreign funding as a cudgel to punish organizations working to strengthen human rights and basic freedoms," Whitson said.

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