



Freedom of the Press 2015 - Jordan

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2015 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 66

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 22

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 24

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 20

The Jordanian press faced decreased levels of overt harassment and violence in 2014 after withstanding an escalation of violence and threats in the previous year. Nevertheless, the government took action against several journalists, principally using a newly revised antiterrorism law, and expanded efforts to silence critics on social-media platforms.

Legal Environment

The constitution guarantees freedoms of speech and expression, but press laws contain vague clauses that restrict media activity in practice. Journalists can be prosecuted under the penal code or tried by the quasi-military State Security Court (SSC) for offenses involving speech and association. A 2011 amendment to the country's main anticorruption law criminalized reporting on corruption without sufficient proof of wrongdoing, including news that defames someone or "impacts his dignity." The 1998 Press and Publications Law prescribes fines of almost \$40,000 for speech that denigrates the government or religion. A 2010 amendment to the law established specialized courts to prosecute press violations.

Further changes to the Press and Publications Law were passed in 2012, imposing restrictions on online news content and requiring news websites to obtain licenses to operate. The amendments apply the law's existing provisions to websites, making it unlawful for online outlets to insult the royal family, harm "Arab-Islamic values," or incite sectarian strife, among other prohibitions. Site owners are also responsible for patrolling reader comments to ensure that they do not violate the law. The government's Media Commission – a new body created from the merger of several media regulators in 2014 – can issue orders, without a court ruling, to block foreign and domestic websites that fail to comply with the law. Press freedom advocates have said the changes have had a chilling effect on free expression online, as the government has used the revised law in numerous prosecutions.

In part due to a lack of diversity of viewpoints in traditional media, the online sphere has quickly grown into a space for independent reporting and news. However, in 2013 the government blocked

approximately 300 local news websites for failing to adhere to new registration and licensing provisions; access to most websites was restored after they came into compliance with the requirements. A number of outlets – most notably 7iber, an opposition outlet that provides critical coverage of sensitive topics – chose to contest the law. Refusing to register, 7iber changed its web address to circumvent the block and operated for approximately a year before being blocked again in July 2014. After coming back online under a new domain, 7iber finally relented in late 2014, registering its website and hiring an employee belonging to the government-backed press union in order to meet the necessary legal requirements.

In April 2014, Jordan passed amendments to its antiterrorism legislation broadening restrictions on speech related to national security issues, which activists censured as an attempt to limit criticism of the government. In June, authorities used the amended law to arrest 12 journalists who were working at an Iraqi television station in Amman. The station, Al-Abasiya, was also shuttered. Throughout the year, authorities also prosecuted several individuals based on content posted on social-media websites, particularly information concerning political or foreign policy issues. Additionally, in December, the military issued a directive that all reports on the activities of the armed forces must first be submitted for approval. Critics widely questioned the overt prior restraint on the press and worried that the move could open the door for more censorship.

In 2007, Jordan became the first country in the region to pass an access to information law. Amendments to the law in 2012 permitted foreigners to request information from the government, something previously disallowed. However, journalists complain that their efforts to obtain information on government policies and officials are often obstructed in practice. According to the Amman-based Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists, the implementation of the law is characterized by inconsistency across state institutions as well as arbitrary classification decisions. In 2014, advocates continued to pressure the government to make improvements to the legislation, including eliminating vague language, expanding the number of institutions subject to the legislation, and increasing public awareness of the law and procedures for requesting information. However, no changes were made by year's end.

Both print media and online outlets must register with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and obtain licenses from the Media Commission. Journalists must belong to the Jordan Press Association (JPA) to work legally. Those who are critical of the government have sometimes been excluded from JPA membership. Furthermore, the chief editors of news websites must have at least four years of prior membership in the JPA in order to obtain a license, and licensing fees for news sites cost \$1,400, which critics deem to be burdensome.

Licensing responsibilities for television and radio are shared by the Council of Ministers, the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC), and the Media Commission. The Council of Ministers is responsible for granting, revoking, and renewing licenses, but it does so based on the recommendations of the Media Commission. In the past, the council has been accused of arbitrary and politicized delays in granting licenses. The Media Commission handles disputes between broadcasters, issues directions on programming, and takes punitive action against broadcasters that violate their licensing conditions. The TRC is responsible for allocating frequencies to broadcasters, issuing telecommunications licenses, and managing information-technology services.

Political Environment

The government tolerates modest criticism of officials and policies, and allows room for opposition movements to express their ideas. However, government attempts to influence editorial content occur regularly, with top officials and security operatives contacting editors and warning them not to publish stories on politically sensitive issues. Journalists routinely practice self-censorship and are aware of "red lines" in media content, including negative coverage of the royal family. In August 2014, the news website Al-Madina removed a story alleging a violation of Jordanian airspace by a Syrian aircraft after the Jordanian military threatened to refer the matter to the State Security Court. Also in August, the daily *Al-Ghad* refused to publish an article by a prominent journalist criticizing the increasing concentration of power by the king.

Journalists faced interference from state actors on several occasions while covering the news in 2014. In January, the chairman of the parliamentary finance committee barred journalists from attending a session about Jordan's annual budget. While there were fewer attacks against the media in 2014 than in 2013, journalists continued to encounter retaliatory threats and violence due to their reporting. In June 2014, two legislators brutally assaulted an online journalist that had criticized a parliamentary session in which they had participated. As Jordanian legislators enjoy immunity from prosecution while in office, no charges were brought against them.

Economic Environment

While some Jordanian news outlets are independent, much of the country's media sector is state-run. The government-owned Social Security Investment Fund has a majority stake in Jordan Press and Publishing, which runs the major daily *Ad-Dustour*, as well as in the Jordan Press Foundation, which publishes *Al-Rai*, the most popular daily, and the English-language *Jordan Times*. *Al-Arab al-Yawm*, considered to be Jordan's main independent paper, suspended operations for two months in 2013, citing financial difficulties. Fourteen employees were fired during this period in a move that human rights organizations say contravened labor laws. Unregistered independent news sites also struggled to remain financially viable, as companies are reluctant to buy advertising space on blocked websites. Bribery threatens independent reporting, and in the past, dozens of media professionals have been accused of accepting payments from the former director of the General Intelligence Department.

The 2003 audiovisual law ended the government monopoly on terrestrial broadcasting, and there has been an increase in the number of private radio stations in recent years – mainly regional outlets that cater to a specific demographic, such as women or students. However, terrestrial television stations remain under state control; the country's first privately owned television channel, launched as a pilot project in 2007, has since stalled. Satellite dishes are allowed, and pan-Arab news channels remain popular. Approximately 44 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2014.