

The Continuous Decline of Press Freedom

A report on the situation of press freedom in Arab countries in 2022

Skyline International Foundation for Human Rights

February 2023

Introduction

According to reports from human rights and professional organizations, 2022 was one of the worst years for press freedom in the world. Record levels were reached that had not been seen in nearly 30 years.

In 2022, notable violations that took on a more extreme character, such as murder, arrest, persecution, and threats, became an approach that went beyond individual or isolated cases. The Middle East region was the largest theatre of these practices, especially the Arab countries, which are very far behind in press freedom indicators.

This deteriorating reality prompted United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to say that "journalists and media professionals face an increasing politicization of their work and a daily growing threat to their freedom to carry out their work smoothly".

The director general of UNESCO, Audrey Azoulay, said in her statements in recent months that "more than five out of six people in the world live in a country where press freedom has declined in the last five years".

In its latest report, the International Human Rights Foundation "Skyline" attempts to shed light on the increasing violations of press freedom and its continuous decline. This decline has led to the deaths of dozens of journalists, in addition to the arrest of hundreds and the closure of offices and revocation of licenses and other matters in many of the countries listed in the report.

Skyline concludes that Arab countries top the list of countries where press freedom is most violated and attributes these violations to the political and security conditions that prevail in countries such as Syria, Yemen, Iraq, the Palestinian territories, and others.

Skyline concludes its report by calling all States and parties to respect the right and freedom to practice journalism without restriction or persecution. It points out that the silence of the international community and its negative role in the face of these violations encourages these parties to continue their violations, even though they seriously violate the rules of international law.

Figures and indicators

Figures monitored and documented by the international human rights foundation "Skyline" show an alarming decline in press freedom. In its 2022 report, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) notes that the number of imprisoned journalists worldwide has reached its highest level in thirty years. By December 1, 2022, 363 journalists had been imprisoned, a record and a 20 per cent increase over 2021.

The annual survey of violations committed against journalists around the world published by Reporters Without Borders sets a new record: 533 media professionals were imprisoned in 2022, while 57 journalists were killed worldwide in the past 12 months. The organization has also documented at least 65 hostages and 49 missing journalists.

Reporters Without Borders reported another record for the imprisonment of female journalists in 2022: 78 female journalists are currently behind bars, an unprecedented increase of about 30 per cent in the last 12 months. **It should be noted that women now account for 15 percent of the total number of imprisoned journalists, whereas five years ago this percentage was 7 percent.**

Arab countries that most violate freedom of the press

The figures collected by "Skyline" show that Scandinavian countries rank first in the world in terms of respecting and guaranteeing freedom of the press. Most Middle Eastern countries, especially the Arab countries, followed by Iran, North Korea and Eritrea, bring up the rear in the rankings.

Middle Eastern countries still suffer from security control by many governments and security agencies at the expense of freedom of the press and freedom of expression. This is illustrated by the continuous decline in the press freedom index in these countries.

It should be noted that the repression of journalists continues in all Middle Eastern and Arab countries and is increasing rather than decreasing. These countries reached record numbers in the violation of the right to freedom of the press, as the number of attacks was higher and more extreme than in other countries.

The most striking violations

The murder of Al-Jazeera correspondent, Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Aqleh, while covering the Israeli army's storming of the Jenin Palestinian camp last May was one of the clearest demonstrations of the dangers journalists face in their work.

However, this violation was not the only one recorded in the Palestinian territories this year, as Skyline has observed more than 250 violations, most of which are direct attacks on journalists.

Syria

Syria, which ranks 171st in press freedom, records more than 50 violations, most of which are arrests. According to Reporters Without Borders, Syria tops the list of countries with the most journalists murdered, in a country that has experienced a devastating war since 2011. In 2022, the murder of three journalists was documented, while 27 journalists are still imprisoned and 42 journalists have been kidnapped.

Skyline International highlighted figures from the Syrian Network for Human Rights' annual report on the main violations against media professionals in Syria. The network said it had documented the killing of 711 journalists and media workers since March 2011 by the parties to the conflict and the ruling forces in Syria, 52 of whom were tortured.

The report shows the result of the most conspicuous attacks on journalists and media workers from May 2021 to May 2022, showing that during this period one of the media workers was killed by Russian forces. During the same period, no less than 39 cases of arrests and abductions of journalists and media workers by the conflicting parties and controlling forces in Syria were recorded, including 13 by the Syrian regime forces, including three women, 11 by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and three by all armed opposition factions/National Army, and 12 by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Yemen

Yemen ranks 169th in terms of press and media freedom. In 2022, three journalists were killed and ten were kidnapped by the Houthi group, including four who were sentenced to death by Houthi judicial authorities and at least two of whom are being tortured and



threatened. In this regard, Skyline states that it is very concerned about the situation of

journalists in Yemen, which continues to deteriorate, as evidenced by the increasing number of journalists seeking protection and leaving the country.

Iraq

In Iraq, which ranks 172nd in press freedom, journalists have been murdered in recent years, which has not been the case this year, although media workers have been repeatedly shot at and had their homes burned, beaten, arrested, and kidnapped. These attacks now occur almost weekly, in addition to attacks on the media. And this is happening at a time when journalists are repeatedly targeted and not given the protection they need to do their jobs.

Press freedom in Iraq's Kurdistan Region has deteriorated alarmingly this year as serious attacks on press freedom have been observed, most notably the government's arrest of four journalists to date.

In November 2022, the journalist "Najhan Akarsel" was assassinated and some journalists were persecuted. who were victims of the political tensions in Kurdistan, especially in the border areas affected by the prevailing conditions in their surroundings such as Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, as well as restrictions and prevention of work and photography and kidnapping.

Skyline highlights the 2022 report of the Association for the Defense of Freedom of the Press in Iraq, which noted a significant decline in press freedom in the country. According to the report, 60 cases of arrest and detention and two cases of death threats were recorded, as well as 12 cases of storming, raiding and armed attack, and 9 injuries and 254 cases of beating, preventing reporting.

The report shows that the association "recorded nine lawsuits, convictions and arrest warrants against male and female journalists, the closure of a station and the dismissal of employees. It also documented 28 official letters of restriction".

continue to commit flagrant violations of the Constitution in Iraq" as we have documented 380 cases of clear violations of Article 38 of the Constitution." It pointed out that the "government's indifference" has led to an increase in the number of violations compared to last year.

Jordan

Tensions in Jordan, which ranks 120th on the World Press Freedom Index, have clearly had an impact on press freedom in the country. some 80 violations were recorded in 2022. Most of these involved arbitrary dismissals, subpoenas of journalists, court cases, and the closure of press websites and social media. For example, the TikTok platform in Jordan was banned in 2022 under the pretext of abuse.

Egypt

Egypt, which ranks 168th on the Press Freedom Index, also ranks fourth among Arab countries in the imprisonment of journalists. While authorities recently released six journalists in connection with the announcement of the National Strategy for Human Rights, they arrested six more within a short period of time.

Skyline points out that the Egyptian state's declaration on the National Strategy for Human Rights is a sham document issued to improve Egypt's image in European countries, which is confirmed by the continuous and increasing repression against journalists and activists by Egyptian security authorities to this day.

The case of "Alaa Abdel-Fattah" was one of the most prominent cases this year in Egypt, where his hunger and drinking strike in connection with the climate summit in Egypt shed more light on the violations committed against journalists by the Egyptian authorities.

Lebanon

More than 74 violations of press freedom have been recorded in the Lebanese Republic this year, most of which are direct attacks on journalists, threats and intimidation.

According to Reporters Without Borders' 2022 classification, Lebanon is ranked 130th. The main violations recorded in Lebanon this year are a continuation of impunity for crimes and violations involving journalists, including attacks on journalists where no one is punished. The most prominent example of this is the case of the murder of the journalist "Luqman Selim", in which there is still no serious investigation that identifies those responsible.

There are also restrictions on journalists in Lebanon, either through threats on social media or direct threats. The head of the Middle East office of Reporters Without Borders believes that threats against journalists are the main issue in the Lebanese scene, in addition to security citations concerning their right.

Also, during the parliamentary elections last May, there were numerous direct and targeted attacks on journalists going about their work, and a number of them were prosecuted, monitored, and threatened with death.

These threats also affected the Lebanese station Al-Jadeed, at whose headquarters a shot was fired and a grenade placed near it, as well as threats and incitement resulting from a comedy broadcast by the station.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia ranks 166th in the press freedom rankings and joins Egypt on the list of the world's worst prisons for journalists. There is still no freedom of the press in Saudi Arabia,

although the kingdom is making every effort to change the system and accept freedom of opinion and speech.

There are still about 25 journalists in custody. The policy of impunity in the case of the murder of the Saudi journalist "Jamal Khashoggi" continues; there is no real progress or implementation of the sentences pronounced by the judicial authorities investigating the case.

Bahrain

There are numerous restrictions on journalists and media in Bahrain, which ranks 167th. A large number of journalists have been banned for unclear reasons, without any indication of the legal grounds for the ban.

The annual report of the "Bahrain Press Association" states that in the first half of 2022 there were a number of violations affecting journalists and media content producers. The number of cases that the Bahrain Press Association was able to document is around 15.

According to the report, the abuses identified were five cases of interrogation and detention, three court cases, and seven cases of ill-treatment, including denial of treatment, telephone hacking, or intimidation.

According to the report, journalists who were arrested or tried were mainly charged with "spreading false news," "insulting and defaming," "criticizing the Chamber of Deputies," and "insulting and defaming personalities"

The report states, "The above figures represent a significant decrease in the number of violations compared to previous years, but this does not mean that repressive policies or security measures have been relaxed, but rather indicates that many citizens continue to refrain



is relaxed or generalised as much as possible.

The UAE

The United Arab Emirates is not faring any better, having dropped seven places to 138th. The reason for this is the increase in violations against the press, due to measures and laws enacted by the authorities to silence dissent and suppress the independent press at home and abroad.

Emirati journalists outside the country have not been spared harassment or arrest. The Reporters Without Borders report points out that most Emirati media are owned and run by institutions close to the government, and that English-language newspapers also have a major influence on readers.

Skyline points out that the authorities use the term "social cohesion" and other vague phrases as a pretext to silence any voice that disagrees with the government. According to the report, the government suppresses national newspapers and does not hesitate to impose sanctions on them as well.

Kuwait

Kuwait, ranked 158th, is considered one of the least repressive countries in the Gulf region, but authorities exercise extensive control over the media. Although Kuwaiti authorities are not known for arresting journalists or threatening their lives, they have recently forced some journalists to live in exile to avoid imprisonment.

Subpoenas and brief detentions have a chilling effect on media freedom, especially on journalists who report on a range of issues that authorities consider red lines, including migrant workers' rights, women's rights, administrative corruption, and other issues that could lead to the arrest or subpoena of journalists who report on them.

Tunisia

Tunisia dropped from 73rd in 2021 to 94th in the World Press Freedom Index published in May 2022, with an average score of 21.

The number of attacks on journalists in Tunisia has increased over the past year, reaching 244 last November, according to a report by the National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists. The peak of these attacks occurred during coverage of the July 25 referendum on Tunisia's new constitution.

Presidential Decree No. (54), issued last September, poses the greatest challenge to Tunisian journalists because it contains broad concepts that allow for the repression, detention, and imposition of fines on journalists. Many human rights organizations that have criticized the decree believe that this fuels fear and increases self-censorship.

More than 46 Tunisian professional and human rights organizations considered that the decree posed an "imminent threat" to the freedoms and achievements of the Tunisian revolution. The decree provides for imprisonment of five years and a fine of more than \$15,000 for anyone "who intentionally uses communication networks to produce, promote, publish, send, or prepare, fabricate, falsify, or falsely attribute the information to others, false news, data, rumors, or documents to violate the rights of others or harm public security or national defense. The penalty is doubled if the victim is an employee or official of the state."

Algeria

After the imprisonment of numerous journalists and the closure of a number of media platforms, Algeria ranks 134th in the World Press Freedom index.

In 2022, Algerian authorities shut down Radio M and the news website Maghrib Emergon and arrested its chief reporter, Ihsan al-Qadi. Previously, Algerian authorities had arrested journalists and revoked foreign media licenses for various reasons.

Skyline points out that press freedom in Algeria is subject to much harassment, as the mere mention of corruption or the suppression of demonstrations can lead to journalists being threatened or even arrested.

Independent media is also constantly under pressure, and websites are being blocked.

Morocco

Morocco ranks 135th on the World Press Freedom Index, up from 136th a year ago. However, this progress has not prevented violations related to the arrest and extortion of journalists and the expulsion of foreign journalists.

In 2022, there was a significant deterioration in press freedom, an increase in arbitrary arrests of journalists, the expulsion of foreign journalists, and the use of censorship against journalists for their work. In addition, the Moroccan government used "trumped-up" charges of sexual harassment to prosecute and imprison journalists for their work.

Sudan

Sudan, ranked 151st, has made significant progress on press freedom, particularly following the decision to establish the first independent journalists' union in the country, 33 years after former President Omar al-Bashir's decision to dissolve unions in 1989.

However, this has not prevented rights abuses, particularly in the aftermath of the coup in Sudan, in which 55 journalists and media outlets were attacked between October 2021 and March 2022, according to the European Media Observatory.

According to the Observatory, the country also saw "arbitrary arrests, harassment, office closures, and physical and psychological attacks." Sudanese authorities have blocked numerous radio stations and Internet services.

According to the Observatory, the country has also seen "arbitrary arrests, harassment, closure of offices, and physical and psychological abuse." Sudanese authorities have blocked numerous radio stations and Internet services.

Libya

Libya ranked 143rd until it became one of the countries whose journalists suffered the most from multiple and complex rights abuses that forced many of them to leave the country.

Skyline states that the Libyan Independent Media Organization documented 14 violations of press freedom for the period from May 2021 to May 2022, including 10 attacks on journalists in five Libyan cities.

The organization concluded that press freedom violations last year remained at the same level and in the same context as in previous years, ranging from "forced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, and physical attacks"

The report states that Sirte city leads with 40 percent of assaults, followed by the cities of Tripoli and Benghazi with 20 percent, and Sorman and Ajdabiya with 10 percent, indicating that women journalists are still being attacked in Libya, as abused women journalists account for 10 percent.

Legal remedies:

In many of its conventions, international law affirms the need to protect journalists and remove obstacles to the exercise of their work. It points out that any restriction or persecution related to the work of journalists constitutes a serious violation of the rules that require the perpetrator to be held accountable.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers."

Article 2 of the 1978 Declaration UNESCO on the contribution of the media to the promotion of international peace and understanding, to the promotion of human rights, and to the fight against racism and incitement to war affirms that "the exercise of freedom of opinion and expression and of information, recognized as an integral part of human rights and fundamental freedoms, is an essential factor in the promotion of international peace and understanding".

The 2002 Johannesburg Declaration on National Security and Freedom of Information recognises the right of access to information as one of the rights necessary to ensure the right to freedom of opinion and expression

The 2004 Arab Human Rights Charter states, "The Charter guarantees the right to information, freedom of opinion and expression, and the right to seek, receive and impart news and ideas to others by any means and regardless of geographical frontiers".

Conclusion

Skyline confirms that observing the deteriorating state of press freedom in Arab countries and the world, in general, raises concerns about what 2023 might bring. This is due to the continuous deterioration of press freedom conditions in recent years, while political and economic indicators point to further crises worldwide.

In this context, Skyline points out that it fears that the silence of the international community or its negative role towards the violations of press freedom in many Arab countries could lead to even more serious and dangerous violations for those working in the field of journalism and media, especially if the policy of impunity continues.

The human rights foundation stresses that the first steps that must be taken to protect press freedom in Arab countries must begin with the adoption of modern laws that keep pace with progressive development, ensure the protection of press freedom, and bring violators to justice and before the criminal justice system.

Arab regimes are also urged to implement and respect the multiple rules of international law that guarantee freedom of the press, freedom of expression and opinion, and the unrestricted and unpunished dissemination of information. It points out the importance of these governments releasing all imprisoned journalists and activists, stopping the political trials against them, and allowing them to freely exercise their activities.

At the end of the report, Skyline International calls on the international community to take more serious and realistic measures to protect press freedom in Arab countries by putting pressure on governments to respect the right of individuals to carry out their journalistic activities, sparing them from political tensions and some internal conflicts, and establishing constant contact with press unions to learn about the situation of journalists in these countries.