

Summary of the 2010 Annual Report

Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Jordan

The SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedoms (SKeyes) has issued its annual report on the status of media and cultural freedoms in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Jordan in 2010. The report relied on news and information collected and disseminated by SKeyes throughout 2010, which in turn were based on information gathered by SKeyes correspondents in the four countries covered by the center's current scope of work, or from reliable human rights and media information sources.

Lebanon: Violations and threats transpiring in Lebanon in 2010 may be listed under the following categories:

- Assaults on journalists and cases wherein they were prevented from carrying out their jobs. There were 13 such incidents of assaults on journalists in 2010, carried out with the intention of preventing them from expressing their views. The methods of intimidation varied between threats, verbal and physical abuse, and threatening messages with varying character and tone, all directed at them.
- Legal action against journalists, where the number of cases lodged exceeded 50, mostly on the grounds of libel, slander but also for inciting sectarianism.
- Censorship on the media, cultural events and the internet, where films, books, television programs were banned or suspended, while a number of bloggers were detained and websites hacked.

Lawsuits for libel and slander dominated the instances of legal action

taken against journalists and opinion makers, due to the escalating nature of the discourse among political leaders. The remaining five cases, meanwhile, involved issues pertaining to the Order of Journalists, and the court ruling to freeze the election process therein to choose a successor for the deceased Chairman of the Order, Melhem Karam. A number of journalists also received prison sentences, despite objections by the press corps, as this violated the Lebanese norms currently in place. However, these sentences had not been carried out as of the time of the issuance of the annual report.

Despite this, Lebanon ranked 78th in the annual survey of press freedoms for 2010, published by Reporters Without Borders, which investigated the status of press freedoms in 175 countries. The report mentioned that “Although the Lebanese press continues to enjoy freedom of expression virtually unrivalled in the region, it has been undermined by political tensions.”, and said that “the opening on 1st March 2009 of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) to try those accused of terror attacks against Lebanese figures could allow light to be shed on the 2005 murders of journalists Samir Kassir and Gebran Tueni.”.

Syria: Month after month and year after year in Syria, and ever since the declaration of the state of emergency in the country in 1963, everything that takes place (but which must not take place) confirms that the exception has become the rule in this country, and that the rule has become the exception!

The rule in Syria now, as it may be possibly disclosed by those who seek to change this ‘rule by exception’, even if at risk to their families and lives, is as follows: Arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and unjust court sentences, in addition to sham trials, fabricated charges, incidents of solitary confinement, and physical and psychological abuse

against human rights defenders and freedoms activists, as well as Kurdish and communist political leaders. This is not to mention citizens who support Kurdish positions and who reject the security services' hold on their daily lives, and day-to-day threats under various pretexts. The systematic repression of Kurdish culture in all its aspects also figured highly in such violations.

All these daily, or almost daily, violations, took place within the framework of various 'legalized' and bizarre and unheard of charges, such as: "Spreading false news that may debilitate the morale of the nation"; "Belonging to a secret society with the intention of altering the state's economic and social identity"; "Attempting to, through acts or disseminating speeches or writings or other means, to cause the secession of a part of the Syrian territories and annex it to a foreign country, or grant it a concession that is the privilege of the Syrian state alone"; "Breaching measures taken by the state to maintain its neutrality in war", "Engaging in acts, writings or speeches not approved by the state"; "Undermining the reputation of the state, and joining an association aimed at altering the structure of the state"; "[Engaging in] calls aimed at weakening the national sentiment and inciting sectarian and ethnic strife"...in addition to the plethora of other terminology used by the Syrian authorities – represented by the Syrian judiciary or the security services, led by the State Security Services – in the context of the accusations made against any dissenters or those who have and/or express different opinions or beliefs.

This is while bearing in mind that the **Syrian Constitution, in Article 25**, stipulates, "Freedom is a sacred right. The state protects the personal freedom of the citizens and safeguards their dignity and security." This is while **Article 38** mentions that "Every citizen has the right to freely and openly express his views in words, in writing, and through all other means of expression. He also has the right to participate in supervision

and constructive criticism in a manner that safeguards the soundness of the domestic and nationalist structure and strengthens the socialist system. The state guarantees the freedom of the press, of printing, and publication in accordance with the law.”

Jordan: The remarkable calm recorded throughout the last two months of the year, could not erase the gravity and bitter nature of the incidents witnessed in the media and cultural arenas in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, during the first ten months, each of which having seen important and dangerous developments that nearly dragged the press into the abyss. This is particularly the case with the ever growing problem between the four daily newspapers in Jordan on the one hand, and the electronic news sites on the other hand. The problem was worst in March 2010, as it crossed the limits of courtesy in certain instances, taking on a nonsensical direction and involving serious allegations. The matter became even worse when the government became involved, and criticized the electronic news sites and accused some of “libel and character assassination with regard to the freedom of the media”. As a result, the Jordanian press corps became strongly polarized, to the point that some members of the General Assembly of the Press Syndicate called for the syndicate’s council to be dissolved.

But things remained calm owing to compromises and temporary remedies, which ultimately failed to settle things once and for all, until the disputes broke out again in August 2010, when the Jordanian government ratified the ‘Information Systems Crimes Law’, with the ensuing reactions that denounced this move and called for it to be overturned. This is not to mention the serious implications the law produced. Meanwhile, a number of website owners decided to gradually shut down their sites in protest of the government’s decision to prohibit public sector employees from browsing these sites during office hours,

declaring that the former Prime Minister Samir Rifai is an ‘enemy of freedom’. The snowballing campaign of denouncements, which lasted until the end of August, culminated with the government amending the act and reissuing it in revised form (**See Appendix I on the Act**).

With regard to direct violations, summonses, arrests, and detentions of journalists and writers continued throughout the year, in addition to various threats, harassments, and of course trials and sentences against them. However, the dominant and most sinister development in this regard, involved the summonses against journalists and their subsequent referral to the State Security Court, whereupon they were interrogated and detained, while some were released on bail set at excessive amounts. This was widely condemned.

In addition, there was the issue of sustained censorship against books in Jordan, as books were either banned or disallowed from entering the country. Also, writers and journalists were prevented from carrying out their jobs and covering or mentioning certain issues. Finally, directives were issued regulating the work of internet cafes, in a manner that restricted their freedom of operation.

However, in the midst of all this, the Court of Appeal surprised everyone when, for the first time ever in Jordan, it exonerated a newspaper, its editor and a writer working for it, from all counts of violating Articles 5 and 7 of the Press and Publications Act, and upheld the journalists’ rights to news coverage.

The West Bank under the Palestinian National Authority: The report indicated that more than 20 journalists were detained in the West Bank, which is governed by the Palestinian National Authority, by Palestinian security services, repeatedly and for varying periods of times, without being charged on specific counts or on sound legal grounds, other than belonging to media outlets affiliated with Hamas. These arrests reflected

the sharp dispute between Fatah and Hamas, which reached such an extent that Tarek Abu Zeid, a correspondent of the Hamas-affiliated Al-Aqsa Satellite TV, was sentenced to prison by a military court in the West Bank. The sentence by a military court against a Palestinian journalist was the first of its kind, since the Palestinian National Authority came to power in the West Bank.

One of the most significant violations against the media in 2010 involved the decision by the Palestinian National Authority to shut down 18 local radio and television stations for “failure to meet technical and professional requirements”.

On the other hand, more than 70 Palestinian journalists came under deliberate gunfire or direct targeting by tear gas canisters or rubber bullets, and/or were detained by Israeli forces. This took place mostly while they were covering the weekly demonstrations against the separation barrier in Bil'in and Beit Amr, where journalists, side by side with the unarmed demonstrators, were directly assaulted and at close range, with the intent of deterring them from covering such events and conveying the reality of such continuous assaults against the land and the people.

One of the most sinister Israeli violations against the journalists involved the use of several photojournalists as human shields, when they were detained at a mid-point location between the soldiers and demonstrators. This placed them in the direct line of fire for bullets and gas canisters lobbed by the Israeli forces on the one hand, and the demonstrators' stones on the other hand.

Meanwhile, Israel orchestrated a ‘cultural’ and ‘educational’ war against Palestinian detainees in Israeli prisons, for example by confiscating their books in the Ashkelon prison, while prisoners continued to be prohibited from taking the high school baccalaureate exams for the third year in a row.

The Gaza Strip under Hamas: Israeli forces became heavily involved in otherwise repeated assaults against Palestinian journalists, correspondents and photojournalists witnessed the Gaza Strip, by directly and deliberately targeting them with live ammunition and tank shells, culminating with the barbaric raid on the Freedom Flotilla, the convoy of ships carrying medical and humanitarian supplies to Gaza. This raid took place in international waters off the Palestinian coast (May 13, 2010), claiming the lives of nine Turks, and injuring scores of unarmed journalists and civilian activists.

In addition to repeated and menacing assaults by Israeli forces, police and security officers affiliated with Hamas also carried out several violations against writers, intellectuals and artists in Gaza, further exacerbating their suffering and anguish.

On January 26, 2010, the Director General of the Police issued a directive requiring officers and personnel “not to abuse journalists and to deal with them courteously and facilitate their tasks”, while he stressed that the police command “will not tolerate any breach of this directive, and violators shall be held to account”. But in spite of this, violations against journalists continued throughout the year, including direct physical assaults, detentions, and arrests made under loose pretenses such as ‘inappropriate conduct.

Hamas then shocked everyone in Gaza and beyond, when it decided to detain the British journalist Paul Martin and then extend his detention, after he was charged with collaborating with Israel (he is the first foreign journalist to be held by Hamas since it took control of the Gaza Strip on June 14, 2006.) This is in addition to an almost endless list of summonses which became dramatically more frequent, and raids against homes and offices, of which some were shut down in a shambolic manner. This was the case with the verbal decision by Hamas security

services to close down the headquarters of the Press Syndicate in Gaza, a decision that was overturned hours later with a mere phone call. In addition, there was a wave of threats and repression, and a semi-organized campaign against Western dance troupes in Gaza, as well as several types of bans enforced against, among others, news coverage, employment, publishing, broadcasting as well as travel bans. These culminated with certain newspapers being banned from entering Gaza, and a wide campaign against human rights and civil society organizations, hotels, and restaurants, which were harassed and prohibited from organizing parties and celebrations, while some were closed down under various pretexts.

The Occupied Palestinian Territories: Were it not for the gravity of the assaults that were stepped-up by Israeli forces against Palestinian journalists, reporters and photojournalists in Jerusalem and the territories of 1948 throughout 2010, the series of proposed racist laws introduced by the Israeli authorities against the Arab minority would have dominated the news there, and would have masked the sound of bullets and the smoke of gas canisters used in these assaults.

The Israeli authorities let loose their police, soldiers and special units, in addition to extremist Jewish settlers, encouraging them to assault Palestinian, Israeli and foreign reporters, photojournalists and human rights activists alike, deliberately using gas canisters, smoke grenades and rubber bullets. This took place as journalists were covering clashes in Jerusalem, Al-Aqsa mosque and the roads leading to it, and the weekly peaceful protests against the racial separation barrier. As a result, scores of them suffered injuries, burns, bruises and severe suffocation in certain instances, while some had to be hospitalized. Others were forcibly removed from the scene and prevented from carrying out their duties. In some cases, some journalists were assaulted more than once in

the course of the same day, while 13 of them were assaulted at the same place, two days in a row. In addition, several journalists were hit by stones hurled by Palestinian protesters, when Israeli ‘trickery’ succeeded in spreading suspicions among demonstrators towards journalists and reporters, after Israeli undercover units had been planted among the protesters, disguised as photojournalists, and assaulted the protesters or detained them several times.

This is of course not to mention beatings of journalists, using batons and clubs in certain instances, and subsequent arrests, interrogation and investigation and the ensuing psychological abuse and intimidation, wherein the journalists were forced to sign confessions or pledges accepting to be deported and banished from the scene, especially from Al-Aqsa mosque. This is in addition to their being sentenced to paying excessive fines that they could not possibly afford.

The series of assaults did not stop at this point. Harassments continued unabated throughout the year, including: summonses, humiliating searches, and arrests and detention of journalists, writers, intellectuals and human rights activists. Also, some instances of detentions were extended without sound legal grounds, while others were indicted on serious counts such as ‘espionage and terrorism’, which may well expose them to maximal prison sentences up to life imprisonment and having their citizenship revoked, which in most cases forces defendants to make out-of-court settlements to mitigate their sentences. Travel bans and racist incitement were not absent either, affecting the lives of journalists and artists almost on a daily basis, in addition to raids against homes, offices and instances of house arrests.

With regard to racist directives, laws and proposed laws targeting the Arab minority, the year 2010 has been characterized and marked by these, and this shall be addressed in detail in a special supplement (Appendix II) published alongside the annual report. The most

significant and most sinister of these by far, was the ‘Transparency Act’ ratified by the Israeli Knesset to intimidate civil society groups, in addition to the Israeli government’s endorsement of the highly publicized racist ‘Jewish State’ law, and its enforcement on the Palestinian minority. This is while the policy of imposing Zionist doctrine in Arab schools and the violation of Arab cultural rights continued to be pursued, in parallel with persistent efforts to Judaize the city of Jerusalem.