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Challenges to press freedom in the Arab Region

Press freedom and journalists in the Arab Region face major challenges that severely restrict the media sector's ability to effectively serve public interests, maintain independence, and counter polarizing rhetoric and misinformation. Laws in all Arab countries severely limit freedom of expression, meaning journalists and the general public alike face possible criminal punishment for violating these laws, which often also prohibit the publication of information deemed offensive, embarrassing, or sensitive. Journalists may be subject to retaliation from the authorities for their opinions, as was the case with the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Legal framework:

Media laws in the Arab region are complex and differ from one country to another, but they all contain articles that restrict freedom of the press and expression, impose censorship and control over media content, and legally prosecute journalists, bloggers, and activists who express their opinions against human rights violations or politically sensitive issues in the country.

Restrictions on freedom of expression constitute a major challenge to press freedom in the Arab region. Laws and regulations that restrict freedom of expression include defamation laws, defamation of religion laws, and anti-terrorism laws. Censorship and control over content are also common in the Arab region, with governments and responsible authorities often censoring or blocking content they deem offensive or harmful. Content control can also take the form of self-censorship by journalists and the media, who may sidestep certain topics or opinions in order to avoid legal consequences. Violating media law in the Arab

region can lead to a variety of legal consequences, including fines, imprisonment, and even death.

For example, “Mada Masr”, an independent news website in Egypt facing censorship and legal harassment. Three female journalists¹ working for it were referred to trial on charges of abusing members of the Egyptian Parliament of a pro-Government party and misusing social media after they documented the involvement of deputies in serious financial irregularities in a press report.

The Suffering of Journalists in conflict zones

In conflicts and unstable security zones, such as Syria, Yemen, Sudan, and Palestine, journalists, in addition to their task of covering events, carry out the difficult task of collecting and disseminating information about human rights violations and war crimes and providing crucial evidence to hold war criminals accountable. Therefore, their work in documenting crimes and helping to support human rights, as well as establishing accountability can make them the first target of those involved in the conflict.

Journalists, working in these countries, are subject to many violations, including killing, torture, arrest, unfair trials, enforced disappearance, and threats from all parties to the conflict that ignore that they are protected under international law and their safety must be preserved, and directing deliberate attacks against them is a war crime. Meanwhile, the international community continues to remain silent about these crimes and proceed without accountability, which allows the parties to the conflict to continue their violations. The direct killing of journalist Sherine Abu Aqleh by the Israeli occupation forces while

<https://www.france24.com/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7/20230228-%D8%A5%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-3-%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%88%D9%82%D8%B9-%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%89-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%83%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%B7-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9>¹

she was carrying out her work, and the international community's disregard of all evidence, is the best proof of that. In Yemen, the cases of targeting journalists, enforced disappearance, arbitrary arrest and detention, and torture exceeded 1,465 cases.

Women Journalists in the Middle East

Media and journalistic professions in the Arab world are among the most difficult and sometimes dangerous professions for all those who practice them. However, they are more difficult for women due to the patriarchal² system's control over most media institutions and sometimes even over civil institutions.

Arab women in the media sector face social and economic challenges and innumerable difficulties in achieving their duty, such as physical and verbal harassment, rejection by institutions and by their families, in addition to the lack of wages compared to the wages that males receive for doing the same work.

In the Palestinian territories, a large part of Palestinian society believes that the profession of journalism is not suitable for women. The nature of the violations faced by journalists, which include beatings, arrests, and physical and verbal harassment, led people there believe that journalism is a male-only profession. Many Palestinian families consider that when a journalist is called for interrogation or arrested and harassed on the basis of her journalistic work, it is a shame that affects not only the journalist but also her entire family.

In Tunisia, 54% of female journalists are working in the media sector, according to the latest statistics provided by the Tunisian Syndicate of Journalists in 2020. Despite the dominance of females in the sector,

https://genderiyya.xyz/wiki/%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85_%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%8A²

the percentage of female journalists assuming decision-making positions in the Tunisian media do not exceed 11%.

As for the reality of Syrian female journalists outside the country, they are exposed to many instances of discrimination and pressure from media organizations or other parties, as there are some Syrian female and male journalists working without work contracts that guarantee them their full rights in the face of the institution for which they work. 45 violations were documented by the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression against Syrian female journalists outside Syria, from 2011 until the end of May 2022³.

Absence of independent media in the Arab region

It is difficult to talk about the existence of independent media in a region where freedoms are still legally restricted, and political money is the most apparent pillar in the media sector. Media institutions are not allowed to carry out their work without obtaining licenses from the authorities that impose their conditions for approval, which limits the space for media freedom.

Legally, the Arab region suffers from the absence of clear laws and legislations that guarantee media freedom and define the nature of the relationship between the media organization and executive institutions. Although the constitutions in all Arab countries guarantee freedom of media and expression, they have not been accompanied by legislation that guarantees this freedom and is in line with international covenants and standards in this regard.

Most of these legislations contain loose articles such as defamation, terrorism, and others, which would impose harsh penalties, up to the death penalty, on workers in this field. In addition to the laws related to the press, such as the laws of publications, publishing, cybercrime, and others, the journalist may find himself besieged by additional laws, such as the terrorism law, or be tried in exceptional courts.

<https://tafaseelpress.com/news/2822> ³

Economically, the media scene in the Arab region has not been immune to the successive economic crises that affected the region as a result of the Arab Spring revolutions and Covid-19. Its policy is commensurate with the vision of the funder. Some media organizations were forced to lay off their employees to reduce the financial burden.

The media institutions' need for funding prompted many politicians and influential people to rush to invest in media institutions to promote their own political interests and ideologies and effectively, the media becomes a platform for politicians rather than a platform for the people.

Conclusion and recommendations:

The Baraem Association for Social and Charitable Work and the Journalist Support Committee express their deep concern about the restriction of media freedoms and freedom of opinion and expression in the Middle East by strict laws and the negative impacts on journalists and the media sector. They express their strong condemnation of intimidation and threats to journalists in all Arab countries, warning of the seriousness of the continued violations committed against them in light of the continued policy of impunity and the silence of the international community on the serious violations that occur against journalists on a daily basis. They demand:

- Calling on all parties in conflict areas to stop their unjustified violations and work to enable journalists and media professionals to exercise their duties and job roles without restriction or prosecution.
- Ensuring respect for the rules of international law and international humanitarian law, which emphasized ensuring full protection and freedom for journalists and media institutions while carrying out their work in conflict areas.
- Work on capacity-building for female journalists to enable them to continue their work, succeed in it, and overcome all challenges. And provide awareness workshops on the importance of involving Arab women in life in its various political, social, cultural, and other aspects, in order to strike a balance in this regard.
- Repeal all laws and legislation that restrict journalistic work and that violate international conventions that call for respect for freedom of

opinion and expression, and educate the security, executive and even judicial authorities on the importance of independent journalism.

- The immediate release of all journalists in prison.
- Carrying out an international investigation on the violations and human crimes that journalists, male and female, are exposed to during their work.
- Legal justice, an end to impunity and ensuring that victims have access to appropriate remedies.
- Stop exploiting media institutions to promote the ideologies of financiers and influential people.