

RSF's 2018 Index Middle East riven by conflicts, political clashes

The Middle East's countries are yet again at the bottom of RSF's World Press Freedom Index. Armed conflicts, terrorism charges against independent journalists and media, and growing online surveillance and censorship make reporting extremely dangerous for the region's journalists.

Direct victims of conflicts

Conflicts, both armed and political, continue to be the leading threat to the region's journalists. When they are not the victims of artillery bombardment, air strikes, sniper fire, forgotten mines or abduction, journalists are accused of being active participants in the region's diplomatic crises.

With 13 journalists killed in 2017 and more than 20 journalists and citizen-journalists currently held hostage, Syria (no change at 177th) is still the world's most dangerous country for the media and holder of the Middle East's lowest ranking in the Index. Its journalists continue to flee abroad and vast areas have become black holes from which no news emerges.

Yemen (167th) is also mired in a civil (and international) war. The security situation for journalists is now very bad and they are widely regarded with suspicion, either as propagandists for the Houthi rebels or as servants of the government that is recognized internationally or of its backers Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. As a result, they are exposed to the possibility of being attacked, arrested, imprisoned or killed by any of the various parties to the war waged since 2014.

Journalists suffer a similar fate in Iraq (down two at 160th), where they are caught between the rival factions in [open conflict](#) that also wage an information war. Many media have been forced to close and reporters have been physically [attacked](#). Some claim to have been targeted by politicians and armed groups involved in corruption. Journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan were badly affected by tension linked to the [independence referendum](#) or to [protests](#).

The governments of Saudi Arabia (169th), United Arab Emirates (128th), Bahrain (166th) and Egypt (161st) jointly imposed a diplomatic and economic embargo on Qatar (125th) in mid-2017. Their [demands included the closure of the Qatari TV news broadcaster Al Jazeera](#) on the grounds that its allegedly biased coverage of the Arab Spring has been fuelling hostility towards them for years. Many non-Qatari Gulf journalists were meanwhile harassed and some were forced to resign from Qatari TV channels for which they had worked for years or even decades.

Terrorism accusations

In Egypt, as in many other countries in the region, the fight against terrorism has become the regime's key weapon for [cracking down on journalists](#). All independent media and journalists are exposed to the possibility of terrorism charges. At least 30 journalists are currently imprisoned in Egypt in connection with their reporting. What they are actually accused of doing is often vague. They are usually just charged with belonging to a terrorist group or spreading false news. For this, some have been detained provisionally for the past two years. The photojournalist known as Shawkan has been in prison since 2013 and is now one of more than 700 defendants in a mass trial for whom prosecutors have just requested the death penalty.

In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's talk of reform has not translated into any improvement in respect for press freedom. Dozens of activists, government opponents and journalists were [arrested in 2017](#).

In Israel (87th), the fight against terrorism is often used as grounds to bully journalists. Again in 2017, the suspicion of working for TV channels linked to Hamas was sufficient for the Israeli military to [close news agencies](#) or arrest journalists such as Amir Abou Aram and Alaa Al Titi, who were detained administratively for two months at the end of 2017.

Bahrain (166th) also uses this pretext to [continue holding](#) journalists who reported information that the authorities would have preferred to suppress. They include Ahmed el-Mousawi, a photographer who covered opposition protests and who is serving a ten-year jail term for allegedly "distributing SIM cards" to "persons implicated in terrorist acts." They also include Nabeel Rajab, a blogger and human rights defender who was sentenced to five years in prison in February 2018 for [tweets in 2015 criticizing torture](#) in Bahrain and the Arab coalition's intervention in Yemen.

Cyber-crime laws

In this particularly hostile environment for journalists, the Internet has been the only space where a relative freedom to inform still exists. But the region's governments have realized this and, one by one, have been adopting cyber-crime laws in order to gag online journalists and citizen-journalists.

In the United Arab Emirates (down nine places at 128th), new legislation allowed the authorities to arrest the citizen-journalist Ahmed Mansoor and hold him incommunicado on a [charge of](#) posting "false information, rumours and lies" liable to damage the UAE's reputation.

Citizen-journalists in Iran (164th) are also finding it harder and harder to escape censorship. The regime fears freely reported news and information, regarding it as attempted "subversion." As the traditional media are under close control, citizen-journalists on social networks are nowadays at the heart of the [fight for information freedom and political change in Iran](#). But trying to frustrate the regime's desire to maintain a blackout on information is not

without risk. Iran continues to be one of the world's biggest jailers of journalists and citizen-journalists, with around 20 currently detained.

Some countries censor the Internet without waiting for the relevant laws to be promulgated. In Palestine (134th), the Palestinian Authority blocked [several news websites](#) in June 2017, before the cyber-crime law was promulgated in July. Egypt is currently discussing a law on electronic crimes but it already began blocking [more than 500 websites in mid-2017](#). They include dozens of news sites and the sites of local and international NGOs such as RSF.

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