2020 RSF Index: The illusion of peace in the Middle East

Dark clouds still gather over the Middle East, with one country, Iraq, slipping into the countries coloured black on the press freedom map. After a slight drop in the number of infringements, any hopes of appeasement were dispelled by violent crackdowns on public protests, the resumption of increasingly localized military operations and tighter control by iron-fisted governments.

The wars in the Middle East may have become less deadly in the past year but this region still had the largest number of journalists' deaths. Although there was a reduction in violence and insecurity in the region's conflicts, the lull was short-lived. Turkey's operation in Syrian Kurdistan, the government offensive in Idlib in north-western Syria (174th), an upsurge in protest movements in several countries and a drift towards authoritarianism on the part of some governments, were among the threats facing journalists and media organizations in the region.

Keep quiet or we'll lock you up

In countries that are free from conflict, journalists are relatively safe but are still closely monitored and strictly controlled by iron-fisted authorities. **Saudi Arabia** (up two at 170th) and **Egypt** (down three at 166th), acknowledged as stable countries and reliable allies of the West in the region, are the countries with the largest number of journalists in prison after China.

The control over news and information exerted by these two authoritarian governments has been confirmed by the coronavirus crisis. Starting with a wave of arrests of journalists in September 2019, the largest since Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi took over as president in 2014, Egypt has used its arsenal of anti-terrorist legislation to gradually tighten the screws on journalists, particularly since the start of the pandemic. Allegations of spreading fake news are used to justify blocking access to pages and sites on the Internet, and journalists who question official figures have had their accreditation withdrawn.

Control tightened over news and information

All means are used to control news and information. Before the coronavirus health crisis, the Egyptian government openly issued instructions about the death of former president Mohamed Morsi to news organizations in June last year and sent them official statements to publish.

In areas controlled by the Syrian government, the only permitted source of news is the official news agency SANA. Since the appearance of Covid-19, the Syrian health ministry has reasserted the agency's monopoly over news and information about the pandemic.

The slightest hint of criticism, or any reference to cases of infection or corruption and poverty can earn even the most loyal of journalists a summons by the intelligence services or an indefinite prison term. The journalist Wissam Al-Tair, who was close to President Bashar al-Assad, was jailed for several months merely for having mentioned an increase in fuel prices.

News organizations are closely monitored using sophisticated hacking and espionage methods. Saudi authorities collected personal details from the Twitter accounts of thousands of people regarded as opponents of the government and hacked into the phone of Jeff Bezos, owner of the Washington Post, for which the assassinated Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi worked.

Storm of protest meets wave of repression

The second half of the year saw an unexpected wave of protests in several Middle Eastern countries, including **Lebanon** (down one at 102nd), and **Iraq** (down six at 162nd) which has joined the countries coloured black in the Index. Since October last year, the Iraqi media, which referred to the popular discontent in their coverage of the protests, were targeted by the authorities, militias and security forces which used live ammunition to break up rallies. The government has much to do with the climate of hostility: the media regulator has suspended nine TV channels, preventing them from broadcasting, and has also restricted Internet access.

This type of crackdown was inspired by the measures in force in Iran (down three to 173rd) where Internet access is regularly blocked and the government has imposed its own "halal Internet" inspired by Sharia, or Islamic law. This network allows it to restrict the flow of news and information, as occurred when large-scale public protests took place in the country. The creation of the Islamic Radio and Television Union, which has more than 200 members worldwide, also allows the dissemination of Iranian propaganda and fake news beyond its borders.

The proliferation of opposition movements has intensified the polarization of news media and distrust of journalists. In Lebanon, dozens of crews from pro-government and anti-revolutionary television channels were attacked by protesters. Other journalists have been attacked online by political community groups.

In **Israel** (88th), Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu and his supporters regularly attack news organizations, accusing them of propagating fake news and left-wing propaganda, to the point where a journalist who broke a story about a corruption scandal was forced to request a bodyguard to ensure his safety.

At the same time, journalists in **Palestine** (137th) were finding it as difficult as ever to cover the regular Friday protests against Israeli occupation. Tension rose again after the announcement

by US President Trump of the "deal of the century" peace plan and the number of those seriously injured has been rising.

Armed conflict, political instability and the crackdown on protests mean violence is ever-present in the work of journalists in the Middle East. Ensuring the safety of those working in news and information is more of a concern than ever in the region, especially as a number of governments have decided to boost their control over news and information using technological advances to strengthen their scrutiny of journalists. In a climate where the criminalization of journalism and regular crackdowns are the norm and governments are not amenable to the idea of free and independent news media, the very idea of journalism could disappear from the region over time.