Jordan

PRESS FREEDOM STATUS: Not Free

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 22 / 30
(o=BEST, 30=WORST)

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT: 24 / 40
(o=BEST, 40=WORST)

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT: 20 / 30
(o=BEST, 30=WORST)

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE: 66 / 100
(o=BEST, 100=WORST)

QUICK FACTS

Population: 8,118,000
Net Freedom Status: Partly Free
Freedom in the World Status: Not Free
Internet Penetration Rate: 44.0%

Overview
The government tolerates modest criticism of state officials and policies. However, journalists risk arrest under a variety of restrictive laws, and much of the media sector is state-run. A number of journalists were arrested during 2015 in connection with reporting on foreign affairs and their impact on Jordan, including the conflicts in Syria and Yemen. Journalists routinely self-censor, and are aware of certain “red lines” that may not be crossed in reporting, including critical coverage of the royal family. Physical attacks against reporters have decreased in recent years.

**Key Developments**

- In 2015, a number of Jordanian journalists were arrested for crimes authorities connected to their reporting on foreign terror plots and the conflict in Syria.

- The Media Commission issued a series of gag orders in 2015, primarily in response to coverage of the Islamic State militant group.

- In October, the government ruled that defamation charges against journalists and media outlets would be brought under the cybercrimes law, opening the way for prison sentences for offenders.

**Legal Environment: 22 / 30**

The constitution guarantees freedoms of speech and expression, but press laws contain vague clauses that restrict media activity in practice. Journalists can be prosecuted under the penal code or tried by the quasi-military State Security Court (SSC) for offenses involving speech and association. A 2011 amendment to the country’s main anticorruption law criminalized reporting on corruption
without sufficient proof of wrongdoing, including news that defames someone or “impacts his dignity.” The 1998 Press and Publications Law prescribes fines of almost $40,000 for speech that denigrates the government or religion. A 2010 amendment to the law established specialized courts to prosecute press violations.

Further changes to the Press and Publications Law were passed in 2012, imposing restrictions on online news content and requiring news websites to obtain licenses to operate. The amendments apply the law’s existing provisions to websites, making it unlawful for online outlets to insult the royal family, harm “Arab-Islamic values,” or incite sectarian strife.

The government’s Media Commission—a new body created from the merger of several media regulators in 2014—can issue orders, without a court ruling, to block foreign and domestic websites that fail to comply with the law. Press freedom advocates say the changes have had a chilling effect on free expression online, as the government has used the revised law in numerous prosecutions. In 2015, the Media Commission issued a series of gag orders, primarily in response to coverage of the Islamic State.

In October 2015, the government ruled that defamation charges against journalists and media outlets would no longer be brought under the country’s press law, but under its cybercrimes law. The move was criticized by the Jordan Press Association (JPA), which described the amendment as taking media issues “back to square one” by allowing journalists to be imprisoned for press violations, an act that was banned under the press law. Journalists convicted under the cybercrimes law face a minimum of three months’ imprisonment and a fine of up to 2,000 dinars ($2,800). In November, four journalists were arrested under the cybercrimes law. In one case, a reporter from a private television channel was charged with defamation, reportedly over a Facebook post criticizing Arab nations’ inaction on Palestinian issues, among other comments. The same month, three senior staffers at the Al-Hayat
newspaper were also arrested for slander under the law. The status of their cases was unclear at the year’s end.

In 2014, Jordan passed amendments to its antiterrorism legislation broadening restrictions on speech related to national security issues, which activists censured as an attempt to limit criticism of the government. In 2015, Jordanian journalists were arrested for crimes authorities connected to their reporting on foreign terror plots and the conflict in Syria. These included the January arrests of the editor in chief and owner of the Saraya News website, which had reported on a hostage-exchange deal with the Islamic State militant group. Though released on bail in March, the journalists face up to 15 years in prison. The reporter Jamal Ayyoub was arrested in April after several news outlets published an editorial in which he criticized the Saudi-led bombing campaign in Yemen, in which Jordan participates. In July, the journalist Ghazi al-Marayat was arrested for reporting that Jordanian authorities had thwarted an alleged Iranian-backed terror plot.

Jordan passed an access to information law in 2007. Amendments to the law approved in 2012 permitted foreigners to request information from the government. However, journalists say their efforts to obtain information on government policies and officials are often obstructed in practice.

Both print media and online outlets must register with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and obtain licenses from the Media Commission. Journalists must belong to JPA to work legally. Those who are critical of the government have sometimes been excluded from JPA membership.

**Political Environment: 24 / 40**

The government tolerates modest criticism of officials and policies, and allows room for opposition movements to express their ideas. However, government
attempts to influence editorial content occur regularly, with top officials contacting editors and warning them not to publish stories on politically sensitive issues. Journalists routinely practice self-censorship and are aware of “red lines” in media content, including negative coverage of the royal family.

In the past, journalists have faced interference from state actors while covering the news. Journalists run the risk of being attacked in connection with their work, but such incidents have declined in recent years.

**Economic Environment: 20 / 30**

While some Jordanian news outlets are independent, much of the country’s media sector is state-run. The government-owned Social Security Investment Fund has a majority stake in Jordan Press and Publishing, which runs the major daily *Ad-Dustour*, as well as in the Jordan Press Foundation, which publishes *Al-Rai*, the most popular daily, and the English-language *Jordan Times*.

The 2003 audiovisual law ended the government monopoly on terrestrial broadcasting, and there has been an increase in the number of private radio stations in recent years—mainly regional outlets that cater to a specific demographic, such as women or students. However, television stations remain under state control; the country’s first privately owned terrestrial television channel, launched as a pilot project in 2007, has since stalled. Satellite dishes are allowed, and both Jordanian and pan-Arab news channels are popular. Approximately 53 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2015.

Bribery threatens independent reporting, and in the past, dozens of media professionals have been accused of accepting payments from the former director of the General Intelligence Department.