Lebanon

Press Freedom Status: Partly Free
Legal Environment: 20 / 30
(P=Best, 30=Worst)
Political Environment: 22 / 40 (↓1)
(P=Best, 40=Worst)
Economic Environment: 14 / 30
(P=Best, 30=Worst)
Press Freedom Score: 56 / 100 (↓1)
(P=Best, 100=Worst)

Quick Facts

Population: 6,185,000
Net Freedom Status: Partly Free
Freedom in the World Status: Partly Free
Internet Penetration Rate: 74.7%

Overview
Press freedom in Lebanon deteriorated somewhat in 2015, with lawsuits against journalists and news outlets highlighting the political polarization of the media landscape. Physical attacks on reporters increased, particularly during the summer’s antigovernment protests. Nevertheless, the country’s media environment remained among the freest in the region.

**Key Developments**

- As in 2014, government officials and other powerful political actors brought numerous defamation cases against journalists during 2015.

- The deputy news editor for the television outlet Al-Jadeed, Karma Khayyat, was convicted of contempt of court after a high-profile trial in The Hague in September.

- At least eight journalists were physically attacked—mostly by security forces—while reporting on the #YouStink protest movement in late August.

**Legal Environment: 20 / 30**

The constitution provides for press freedom, but vague laws banning news deemed contrary to “national ethics” or “religious feelings” remain on the books. It is a crime to insult the head of state or foreign leaders, and journalists charged with press offenses may be prosecuted either in a military tribunal or in a special publications court. Lebanese journalists complain that media laws are chaotic, contradictory, and ambiguously worded. Provisions concerning the media, which justify the prosecution of journalists, can be found in the penal code, the Publications Law, the 1994 Audiovisual Media Law, and the military
justice code. The Audiovisual Media Law prohibits broadcasting of unauthorized political or religious gatherings, and bans “commentary seeking to affect directly or indirectly the well-being of the nation’s economy and finances, material that is propagandistic or promotional, or promotes a relationship with Israel.”

As in previous years, a number of civil and criminal legal cases targeted journalists and media outlets during 2015, underscoring the judiciary’s failure to guarantee press freedom in the face of politicized litigation. The year’s lawsuits also highlighted the influence of regional powers in Lebanon and the partisan, sectarian nature of the country’s media. In April, the Saudi government announced plans to sue the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Akhbar* for allegedly publishing falsehoods about Saudi Arabia and its leadership. In September, the Lebanese interior minister brought a defamation suit against an *Al-Akhbar* journalist who accused him of bribery in a Facebook post. The post linked the minister to a $606 million fraud scandal involving hundreds of Syrian military figures and Lebanese politicians. In November, the Shiite militant organization Hezbollah initiated a defamation case against news anchor Dima Sadek of Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International (LBCI), a private television station affiliated with the March 14 political bloc, after she accused it of corruption; Hezbollah is a key member of the rival March 8 political bloc.

In the year’s most prominent press freedom case, the Hague-based Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) convicted Al-Jadeed TV deputy news editor Karma Khayyat of contempt of court in September over the station’s failure to remove certain footage from its website. The STL ruled that the content endangered witnesses in the case of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri’s 2005 assassination, which the tribunal had been established to investigate and punish. Khayyat was acquitted of a second, more serious
charge of obstruction of justice, but was fined €10,000 ($11,000) for the contempt conviction.

Lebanon has no freedom of information law, and government documents are difficult to obtain in practice.

Created by the 1994 Audiovisual Law, the National Audio-Visual Council (NAVC) is responsible for licensing media outlets. Broadcast licenses are allocated to ensure that each sectarian group is represented in the media landscape. The 1962 Press Law limits the number of political periodicals and requires the minister of information to withdraw unused licenses for use by other prospective applicants. In practice, licenses are rarely withdrawn; instead, owners sell unused licenses for exorbitant prices, making it difficult to establish a licensed media outlet without significant resources.

In May 2015, eight Lebanese television stations filed a lawsuit against cable and satellite companies, alleging that they violated Articles 87 and 88 of the intellectual property law and Article 6 of the Audiovisual Law by not paying fees for the right to carry the broadcast stations’ content. Although hundreds of thousands of viewers subscribe to cable and satellite services, many providers operate without a license.

**Political Environment: 22 / 40 (↓1)**

Although Lebanon boasts a diverse media landscape, news content is politicized, and an outlet’s coverage tends to reflect the political views of its owners and managers. Accordingly, journalists can most easily access politicians with a sectarian or political affiliation that aligns with their outlet. Journalists whose work conflicts with the political interests of their employers are subject to dismissal. In November 2015, LBCI host Joe Maalouf was fired from his position as director of Fame FM after questioning the personal wealth
of Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil on LBCI. Fame FM is owned by Education Minister Elias Bou Saab, and both he and Bassil are members of the Free Patriotic Movement, part of the March 8 bloc.

The Lebanese censorship bureau has sweeping authority to censor all foreign magazines, books, and films prior to distribution on the basis of defending political or religious views and protecting national security. Religious authorities also wield substantial influence in the review process and are frequently consulted in enacting state bans on publications. In October 2015, the Beirut International Film Festival failed to obtain screening licenses for two films, one featuring a same-sex relationship and the other about the disputed territory of Western Sahara.

Ambiguous media laws and partisan pressure often compel journalists to self-censor. The spread of online media has helped to fill the resulting gaps in coverage, but internet-based journalists, bloggers, and social media users are subject to harassment and interrogations by state agencies.

Observers reported a rise in physical attacks on journalists in 2015, particularly during the so-called #YouStink protests against corruption and political dysfunction. At least eight journalists were assaulted by police or protesters in a two-day period in August. Camera equipment was smashed, and in one incident a television reporter was attacked by members of the security forces while she was reporting live. The following month, as the protests continued, a reporter who was covering a sit-in at the Environment Ministry was forcibly removed by police, who picked her up by her arms and legs and dragged her away. Other journalists were also reportedly abused during the incident.

**Economic Environment: 14 / 30**
Lebanon’s media landscape includes more than a dozen privately owned daily newspapers in English, Arabic, and French, and more than 1,500 weekly and monthly periodicals. Outlets are often affiliated with religious, ethnic, or political groups. Shiite Muslim and Orthodox Christian families own the two largest Arabic-language dailies, *As-Safir* and *An-Nahar*, respectively. Similarly, nine television stations, two digital cable companies, and about 40 radio stations have sectarian affiliation. Some 74 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2015, and many consumers obtain news content online, including through social media; major print and broadcast outlets typically have a robust online presence.

Observers of Lebanese media estimate that revenue from advertising is insufficient to finance most outlets. A decline in annual advertising revenue in 2014 reportedly contributed to a $50 million deficit for Lebanese television stations that year. The losses were partly attributed to competition from international cable networks. To compensate, companies rely on donations from politicians or sell shares to well-connected individuals, despite a provision in the law on audiovisual media that bans funding from sources external to advertising and production. The Choueiri Group, a marketing and advertising company, manages advertising for dozens of satellite, print, and radio outlets, as well as for web portals, cinema, and billboards, giving it a dominant position in the country’s advertising market.