

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Lebanon

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Lebanon's media remained more free in 2011 than those in most other Middle Eastern countries, but throughout the year there were isolated incidents in which officials attempted to curb freedoms of speech and expression. The constitution provides for freedom of the press, but vague laws prohibiting the publication of news deemed to contravene "national ethics" or trample "religious feelings" remain on the books. Journalists are also prohibited from insulting the head of state or foreign leaders, and those charged with press offenses may be prosecuted in a special publications court. Lebanese journalists complain that the media laws are chaotic, contradictory, and broadly worded. Provisions concerning media can be found in the penal code, the Publications Law, the Audiovisual Media Law, and the military justice code, giving the government considerable leeway to prosecute journalists at will, though it rarely does so. A Lebanese media watchdog group has crafted amendments that would abolish prison sentences for crimes related to publishing, loosen restrictions on electronic media, provide for greater transparency of media ownership and financing, and halt requirements for precensorship of political publications. The proposals were still pending at year's end.

A draft law on access to information that was proposed in 2009 would allow citizens to request information held by public bodies. However, it was largely overlooked by lawmakers, and no progress was made on the measure in 2011.

The licensing of print media outlets is subject to quotas for different types of publication and restrictions on the number of days an outlet can publish. Broadcast licenses are allocated to ensure that each of the country's sectarian groups is represented in the media landscape. The 1994 Audio Visual Media Law 382 granted six new licenses to political and sectarian groups, and several additional television outlets with sectarian affiliations have been granted licenses since then, including New TV, owned by a rival of assassinated prime minister Rafiq Hariri, and OTV, owned by Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement.

The Directorate of General Security (SG) is authorized to censor all foreign magazines, books, and films before they are distributed, as well as pornography and political or religious material that is deemed a threat to the national security of either Lebanon or Syria. The government sporadically investigated and detained journalists and attempted to censor news and information in 2011. In June, national security forces banned two politically charged documentaries from a Beirut film festival—the Iranian film *Green Days* and the Lebanese film *What Happened?* In September, lawyer Nizar Saghieh was investigated for writing an article that criticized proposals to restrict lawyers' contact with media; Saghieh argued that the rules could harm the legal defense of the accused, particularly in human rights cases. The media environment in Lebanon is both vibrant and diverse, and outlets are able to express many different viewpoints and cover important events. However, the political strife and violence in the country have contributed to an increased level of self-censorship and security risks for journalists. At the end of 2011, it

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Partly Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

51

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

18

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

19

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

14

remained unclear how rising violence in Syria might affect Lebanon or influence its media.

Journalists in Lebanon continue to face violence and intimidation due to tensions in the region. In March 2011, Ibrahim Dsoki, a correspondent for New TV, received death threats from supporters of the Amal political movement over an opinion piece on his personal Facebook page. On a number of occasions during the year, journalists were harassed while trying to cover protests. Past cases of attacks on or murders of journalists have not been adequately investigated, leading to a climate of impunity.

Lebanon was the first country in the Middle East to authorize private ownership of radio and television stations. It boasts a vibrant media industry that includes more than a dozen privately owned daily newspapers in English, Arabic, and French, and more than 1,500 weekly and monthly periodicals. The two largest Arabic-language dailies are *As-Safir* and *An-Nahar*, owned by Shia Muslim and Maronite Christian families, respectively. There are nine television stations, two digital cable companies, and about 40 radio stations that are similarly linked to confessional groups. News content typically reflects the political viewpoint of a given outlet's affiliated ethnic or religious group. Politicians and influential families own most media companies, and politicians also frequently sit on their boards. In July 2011, Saudi billionaire investor Prince Al-Walid bin Talal increased his holdings in the company that owns the Maronite-affiliated Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) to 85 percent following a long court battle over control of the station. In addition to locally based outlets, access to satellite television has grown substantially over the last decade. The advertising market in Lebanon is extremely limited, and is not able to sustain the breadth of media outlets operating within the country. The Choueiri Group, one of the largest media brokerage firms in the Middle East, has long dominated the small market that does exist. According to the local business magazine *Executive*, it controls an estimated 70 percent of Lebanon's ad spending.

In 2011, 52 percent of Lebanon's 4 million people had access to the internet. The Telecommunications Ministry controls the international gateway for internet traffic. The country lacks the infrastructure necessary for high-quality broadband connections, and does not have a special network to transmit data, relying instead on existing landline telephone networks. Lebanon's blogosphere has been lively in its coverage and analysis of political events unfolding in Syria. However, local coverage of antigovernment protests in Syria in 2011 heightened tensions between the Lebanese government and some media outlets, particularly online publications and blogs. In October, the National Audiovisual Media Council called on Lebanese online publications, including all news websites and blogs, to register with the council, raising concerns among journalists and media watchdog groups that the move was intended to restrict online news coverage and increase self-censorship. Both Twitter and Facebook are popular among Lebanon's internet users, and politicians began to use social media to help build voter support during 2011.

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