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Freedom Of The Press - Israel (2011)

Status: Free
Legal Environment: 7
Political Environment: 15
Economic Environment: 7
Total Score: 29

Israel features a lively, pluralistic media environment in which press freedom is generally respected. Nevertheless, due to ongoing conflicts with Palestinian groups and neighboring countries, media outlets are subject to a military censor, and journalists sometimes face travel restrictions.

Legal protections for freedom of the press are robust. While the country's basic law does not specifically address the issue, the Supreme Court has affirmed that freedom of expression is an essential component of human dignity. The legal standing of press freedom has also been reinforced by court rulings citing the principles laid out in the declaration of independence. Hate speech and publishing praise of violence are prohibited, and the 1948 Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance bans expressions of support for terrorist organizations or groups that call for the destruction of Israel. Publishers are required to receive a license from the Interior Ministry to operate a newspaper, while broadcasters are covered by a separate regulatory regime. The Government Press Office (GPO) requires journalists operating in Israel to have proper accreditation to attend official press conferences, gain access to government buildings, and pass through Israeli military checkpoints. Foreign journalists, including some who are strongly critical of Israeli policies, are generally accredited. However, the GPO has occasionally refused to provide press cards—especially to Palestinians—citing national security concerns, thus preventing the affected reporters from entering Israel. In January 2010, Jared Maslin, the English-language editor for the Palestinian news agency Ma'an, was denied entry to Israel and detained at Ben-Gurion airport for a week for "failing to cooperate under questioning." He was subsequently deported to the United States. Although Maslin withdrew his appeal of the deportation, both he and Ma'an claimed that the withdrawal was made under duress and without due process.

Under a 1996 Censorship Agreement between the media and the military, the censor has the power—on the grounds of national security—to penalize, shut down, or stop the printing of a newspaper, or to confiscate its printing machines. In practice, however, the censor's role is quite limited, and journalists often evade restrictions by leaking a story to a foreign outlet and then republishing it. In 2009, two Palestinian journalists—Hadir Shaheen and Mohammed Sarhan of the Iranian Arabic-language television station Al-Alam—were indicted in Israel for reporting on the deployment of Israeli soldiers to Gaza without clearance from Israeli censorship authorities; after being released to house arrest, they were sentenced in June to two months (eight months with six suspended) in prison. In January 2010, however, the Israeli Supreme Court overturned the prison sentences. Separately, in April 2010, a widely condemned gag order on the case of journalist Anat Kam

was lifted, revealing that she had been charged with "serious espionage" for giving *Haaretz* newspaper reporter Uri Blau over 2,000 classified military documents. Kam, who allegedly leaked the documents during her military service, had reportedly been under house arrest since December 2009, and was indicted in January 2010; negotiations for a plea bargain were ongoing at year's end. Blau, who had been staying in London since before the indictment, returned to Israel for questioning by the Shin Bet domestic security agency in October.

A long-standing law forbidding Israeli citizens from traveling to "enemy states" such as Lebanon and Syria without permission from the Interior Ministry has on occasion been applied to journalists, most recently in 2007. Press freedom organizations have condemned the selective application of the law, as well as the potential effects of such travel restrictions on the diversity of news available to the Israeli public. In general, Israeli journalists are barred from entering the Palestinian territories without explicit military approval. However, under an informal arrangement, the military ignores the presence of Israeli journalists in the West Bank. Israeli journalists have been prohibited from entering the Gaza Strip since 2006 under a military decree that cites their personal safety; this ban was extended to all foreign journalists in November 2008. Following the onset of a major Israeli military operation in the territory in December 2008, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) extended the closed military zone two miles into Israeli territory, effectively preventing both local and foreign journalists from reporting on developments near the border as well. In late January 2009, restrictions on foreign journalists were lifted, as was the rule barring Israeli reporters from the border area. However, the older prohibition on Israelis entering Gaza remained in place at the end of 2010.

Deliberate violence against or harassment of journalists is rare in Israel, but it does occur, with the principal targets being Arab (both local and foreign) journalists. On two separate occasions in March and September 2010, several journalists were either injured or detained while covering clashes between Israeli forces and Palestinians in Jerusalem. The GPO has been known to impose obstacles, especially in airport security checks, for foreign journalists who are suspected of an anti-Israel political orientation.

In June 2010, Israeli commandos arrested and detained 18 international journalists during a raid on a Gaza-bound activist flotilla that was attempting to bring goods into the territory to protest an Israeli naval blockade; nine people were killed and dozens injured during the operation. Many of the journalists were detained in Israeli jails and released after a few days, in some cases without their possessions or travel documents. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), at least six journalists had their equipment either confiscated or destroyed by IDF soldiers. In addition, detained photographer Issam Zaatar, of the Qatar-based satellite television station Al-Jazeera, reported that Israeli soldiers destroyed his camera and broke his arm on one of the ships and later subjected him to a lengthy interrogation. An ensuing debate over the initiation of violence during the raid played out in Israeli print and internet-based as well as international media outlets, with CPJ decrying "Israel's editing and distribution of footage confiscated from foreign journalists."

Israelis are active news consumers. Mainstream Hebrew newspapers garner an estimated one million daily readers, out of a population of less than eight million. The pluralistic makeup of Israeli society is reflected in the vibrant press landscape, which includes 12 daily newspapers. Three of those are mainstream Hebrew outlets, one has a national-religious outlook, three are aimed at ultra-Orthodox readers, one focuses on the Arab population, one is printed in English, and another is in Russian. In addition, there are two daily newspapers that are distributed free of charge. A wide range of weekly newspapers and internet news sites operate, and these are also divided along religious, ethnic, and language lines. The major newspapers are independent, and all newspapers are privately owned and provide a range of views. Some freely criticize government policies and aggressively pursue cases of official corruption.

A diverse selection of broadcast media is available, though ownership is somewhat concentrated. Most Israelis subscribe to cable or satellite services that provide access to international stations. As a result, the dominance of the state-run Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA) in the television market has declined significantly. The IBA's radio station, Ko Israel, and the military-operated Galei Tsahal remain popular, while a broad range of pirate radio stations also operate, serving the country's ultra-Orthodox, Russian-speaking, and Arabic-speaking communities in particular. Israel has the region's highest rate of internet usage, at over 67 percent in 2010, and the government generally does not restrict internet access, though surveillance of internet-service providers and telecommunications services is carried out, ostensibly for security purposes.

[This rating and report reflect the state of press freedom within Israel proper. The West Bank and Gaza Strip are covered in a separate report.]