Freedom House

Lebanon

	2013	2014
Internet Freedom Status	**Partly Free**	**Partly Free**
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	14	14
Limits on Content (0-35)	10	12
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	21	21
TOTAL* (0-100)	**45**	**47**

* 0=most free, 100=least free

Population:	4.8 million
Internet Penetration 2013:	71 percent
Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:	No
Political/Social Content Blocked:	Yes
Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:	Yes
Press Freedom 2014 Status:	Partly Free

Key Developments: May 2013 – May 2014

- Lebanon launched 4G services between March and October 2013 in Beirut, with plans to expand to other regions (see **Obstacles to Access**).
- For the first time, nontransparent and inconsistent filtering by authorities has led to the blocking of dozens of websites, including nine Israeli websites, a website covering a sexual abuse scandal of a Lebanese priest, and a Beirut city guide (see **Limits on Content**).
- Online campaigns by women's rights groups Nasawiya and Kafa contributed to the passage of a new law on domestic violence (see **Limits on Content**).
- Aggressive defamation suits by politicians and businesses, coupled with the growing power of the Cybercrime Bureau, resulted in the continuing interrogation of prominent journalists and other users for social media posts (see **Violations of User Rights**).
- Cyberattacks against political groups, news websites, and social media pages are on the rise, galvanized by an increase in sectarian hate due to the conflict in Syria (see **Violations of User Rights**).

Introduction

The past year in Lebanon has been defined by protracted political and economic stagnation, paralleled by an upsurge in violence. Lebanon went 10 months without an executive government, finally forming a Council of Ministers on February 15, 2014. The country missed its May 2013 deadline for parliamentary elections and, with the end of Michel Sleiman's six-year term on May 25, 2014, faced a vacuum in its highest government position—that of the president. Many non-affiliated demonstrators denounced parliament's decision to extend its term for 18 months, calling it the death of democracy.[1] Hackers took over the parliament's website and called for protests, which went largely ignored.

Simultaneously, repercussions of the Syrian crisis have engulfed Lebanon, as the intensity and frequency of political violence and terrorism—including car bombs targeting civilians and daily battles between militias—have reached levels not seen since the end of the civil war in 1990. The violence has also translated online into heightened sectarian hate speech and increased cyberattacks, coupled with an ironic use of online tools to face the new reality,[2] whether demonstrated in the "I am still alive" app to reassure family and friends after an explosion,[3] or by the Infijarat website, which asks users to predict the place and time of the next explosion.[4]

Lebanese digital activists continue to effectively employ social media for advancing their causes, as well as dealing with the Syrian refugee crisis. For example, a group of activists launched an online campaign to combat the increasing racism against Syrian refugees.[5] The campaign responded online to the decisions of several Lebanese municipalities to impose curfews on Syrian refugees.[6] On the other hand, digital activists continue to face police arrests, interrogations, death threats, and physical assaults. Many unconfirmed reports have claimed attempts by the government and non-state actors to censor or even force the closure of outspoken online forums and social media groups, and activists have voiced concerns about the growing power of the Cyber Crime and Intellectual Property Rights Bureau (Cybercrime Bureau).

Lebanese have historically boasted a strong tradition of freedom of the press and media pluralism, something that was seen as strengthened with the introduction of the internet in 1991 onwards.[7] However, sectarian divisions, bitter partisanship, a vague legal environment, and poor infrastructure—problems that have plagued the traditional media environment for decades—increasingly shape new media and communication technologies. These many issues are often attributed to a struggling economy, constant political turmoil and political corruption stemming from Lebanon's confessional government system.

1 NOW Lebanon, "Activists protest parliament extension", June 20, 2013, http://bit.ly/1gluhzO

2 Ziad Naboulsi, "How the Lebanese's dark humor will keep them "sleeping with the fishes"", YourMiddle East, April 29, 2013, http://bit.ly/1jpwFL2

3 Venetia Rainey, "App Lets Lebanese tell worried loved ones 'I am still alive'", The Daily Star, January 24, 2014, http://bit.ly/1bN4AZn

4 The Arabic term "infijarat" means explosions.

5 For example, see the Facebook page: "The Campaign in Support of Syrians Facing Racism": http://on.fb.me/O8sIwz

6 LBC, "Burj Hamoud municipality imposes curfew on Syrians", April 5, 2014, www.lbcgroup.tv/news/156375/lbcinews

7 The internet in Lebanon was first introduced to the American University of Beirut in 1991. Public access started two years later, but the significant diffusion of public internet access did not take off until the mid-1990s when multiple ISPs were established. See http://webscience.blogs.usj.edu.lb/1636/history-of-web-in-lebanon/.

With this dire backdrop, most of the hope inspired by promises to introduce positive legal, infrastructural, and economic reforms to the Lebanese internet and communications technology (ICT) sector has been dashed. The country that had expected to reconfirm its avant-garde status within the Arab world is now struggling to keep up with its more technologically advanced neighbors. Despite this pessimism, the telecoms sector continues to grow, remaining one of the largest contributors to Lebanon's GDP,[8] and some ongoing plans to enhance the sector, such as the recent introduction of 4G services, continue to progress at a slow pace. Nonetheless, these small infrastructural developments have been largely eclipsed by the calamitous political and security realities.

Obstacles to Access

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) noted that internet penetration has increased from 22.5 percent in 2008 to 70.5 percent in 2013,[9] while fixed (wired) broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants has increased slowly in recent years, from 9.71 subscriptions in 2012 to 9.95 subscriptions in 2013.[10] Moreover, the World Bank estimates that Lebanon's mobile internet penetration reaches that of some Arab Gulf countries, which have the highest penetration rates in the region.[11] A Byblos Bank report noted that towards the end of 2013, 3G and 4G subscriptions reached 36 percent of the mobile telecom market.[12] As part of a plan to increase 3G coverage, the Ministry of Telecommunications reported that 400 new antennas were installed in December 2013 and a plan for installing 900 antennas, an additional frequency, and a third channel is in progress.[13] Overall, the number of mobile phone subscriptions has increased over the past five years, from 34.1 percent to 80.5 percent in 2013.[14]

Most consequential was the introduction of 4G mobile services in October 2013, though only to limited areas, with promises from the Ministry of Telecommunications to expand the coverage soon.[15] Still, while 4G access is limited to parts of greater Beirut, 3G connections also remain slow, sporadic, and unavailable in many remote areas, and the security situation has set back many development and maintenance plans.[16] Due to continued clashes in the northern city of Tripoli, 3G transmission stations were hit on multiple occasions between March and November 2013, intermittently terminating 3G services in northern Lebanon.[17] On the eastern border, mobile phone lines in Lebanon have been exposed to infringements from the Syrian mobile network MTN. In

8 Telecoms 2013 Progress Report, January 3, 2014, http://bit.ly/1oa28kP

9 International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Percentage of individuals using the Internet," 2013, accessed June 25, 2014, http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx.

10 International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Fixed (wired)-broadband subscriptions", 2013, http://bit.ly/1cblxxY

11 The World Bank, "Broadband Networks in the Middle East and North Africa: Accelerating High-Speed Internet Access", January 29, 2014, http://bit.ly/1dBBOqX

12 Byblos Bank, "Lebanon this week", May 26-31, 2014, http://bit.ly/1mtUbZ2

13 Telecoms 2013 Progress Report, January 3, 2014, http://bit.ly/1oa28kP

14 International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions," 2013, accessed June 25, 2014, http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx.

15 Telecoms 2013 Progress Report, January 3, 2014, http://bit.ly/1oa28kP

16 The Daily Star. (2012, Nov 10). Internet speed increases in one year. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Lebanon/2012/Nov-10/194587-internet-speed-increases-in-one-year.ashx.

17 The Daily Star, "Touch repairs 3G station in Tripoli", March 25, 2013, http://bit.ly/1lUZcd5; Onlylebanon, "3g services stopped in Tripoli", November 9, 2013, http://bit.ly/1eIYcoB.

November 2013, Lebanese citizens living in towns as far as 40 km away from the border reported receiving text messages announcing they have reached Syria and may roam on the MTN network.[18]

In the past, internet and mobile services were expensive, slow, unreliable, and difficult to access, especially in rural areas and outside of the capital Beirut.[19] Average internet speeds have doubled since March 2012, but Lebanon's ranking for internet download speed dropped from 151 to 165, according to Ookla's Household Download Index.[20] Lebanon's upload speed rank is even worse (173th).[21] Moreover, political disputes between the Telecommunication Ministry and operators have continued to delay network upgrades.[30] Former Telecommunications Minister Nicolas Sehnaoui said that Lebanese receive only 25 percent of available internet speed and accused the Ministry's Director-General for Investment and Maintenance, Abdulmenaim Youssef, of withholding the sale of additional international bandwidth to internet distributors.[22] Youssef has also been blamed for obstructing a project that aimed to extend DSL services to 500 deprived towns.[23]

Although the government substantially lowered the cost of broadband internet and mobile phone subscriptions in 2011, consumer groups complain that rates remain significantly higher than many other countries.[24] Lebanon stands in the middle of the regional index regarding fixed internet and mobile broadband prices and is classified as a developing country with lower penetration and higher prices than its regional neighbors.[25] The total cost of installing broadband internet at home is between US$84 and US$100, while the monthly subscription for DSL ranges from US$13 to US$91.[26] The monthly subscription fee for 3.9G starts at US$10 for 150MB per month, while 4G starts at US$19 for 750MB per month. Both 3.9G and 4G packages reach US$149 for 40GB per month.[27] Just two years ago, these prices were 80 percent higher and the high bandwidth packages were not even offered. Nevertheless, these prices remain relatively high considering that in 2012 Lebanon had a gross national income per capita of US$9,705, which translates to US$809 per month.[28]

Despite the ministry's slow response to much-needed repairs and upgrades outside of major urban areas, some progress has been achieved in the past year. For instance, in an attempt to curb internet penetration disparity between urban and rural areas, a recent initiative called the Dari bundle allows some 200,000 citizens living in 210 remote towns with no access to DSL to get free phone sets and

18 LBCI, "Syrian mobile phone invasion of Lebanon reached Kahale", November 15, 2013, http://bit.ly/1kvr2Lr .

19 Jad Melki, Yasmine Dabbous, Khaled Nasser and Sarah Mallat (2012). Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon, New York, NY: Open Society Foundation. http://www.soros.org/initiatives/media.

20 Net Index, "Household Download Index Lebanon", http://bit.ly/1oaeitS

21 Net Index, "Household Upload Index Lebanon", http://bit.ly/1jpIxN2.

22 Ministry of Telecommunications website, "Sehnaoui: Lebanese are receiving only 25% of assumed internet speed", June 7, 2013, http://bit.ly/1eNfUpm.

23 Telecoms 2013 Progress Report, January 3, 2014, http://bit.ly/1oa28kP

24 The Daily Star. (2013, February 14). Consumer group raps Lebanon telecoms rates . http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Lebanon/2013/Feb-14/206361-consumer-group-raps-lebanon-telecoms-rates.ashx.

25 The World Bank, "Broadband Networks in the Middle East and North Africa: Accelerating High-Speed Internet Access", January 29, 2014, http://bit.ly/1dBBOqX.

26 See for example: Ogero: http://bit.ly/M50X7C.

27 See for example: Touch: http://bit.ly/1dbRXrM Higher variants of 3g (enhanced) include later releases such as 3.5g and 3.9g. 3.9g from Touch is the fastest mobile broadband connection in Lebanon with a speed reaching up to 21.6Mbps. Alfa offers 3.5g.

28 World Bank. (2012). Lebanon. http://data.worldbank.org/country/lebanon.

monthly mobile internet pricing equal to the fixed DSL price.[29] More recently, mobile operators introduced eight bundles providing deeply discounted rates for certain disadvantaged customers, reducing some bills by up to 88 percent.[30] The "Bil Khidmeh" bundle provides special rates for members of the Lebanese army, civil defense, and municipality police. The US$10 per month offer includes 60 minutes, 60 SMS messages, and 200 MB of internet. Moreover, tariff decree number 6297, adopted on November 9, 2011, allowed for 20 percent discounts on DSL prices in educational institutions and decree number 8058, issued on April 25, 2012, made internet free between midnight and 7a.m. and all day in public parks.[31] Due to enhancements to the telecoms infrastructure, the financial advisory group Business Monitor International expected that information technology (IT) market spending will increase from a growth of 5.1 percent in 2013 to 7.4 percent in 2014, despite the drastic economic impact of the Syrian refugee crisis.[32]

The relatively high prices have not deterred most Lebanese from using internet and mobile services extensively, particularly the youth. Internet usage and digital literacy, however, tend to drop among older and less affluent citizens, as with rural inhabitants.[33] Disruptions to internet services are infrequent in urban areas, but tend to occur more often outside of Beirut. The disruptions are usually caused by technical problems and the inability of the network to handle the increased user load, but last year a mix of political, economic, and natural factors caused many disruptions.[34] To make things worse, Lebanon continues to be liable to frequent electrical blackouts, sometimes lasting several hours per day, especially outside the capital. In May 2013, Lebanon suffered from power outages across all its regions as a result of bad weather,[35] and in December 2013, it underwent additional power cuts due to a lack of government funds to buy oil.[36] Similarly, in November 2013, news reports warned of internet disruptions in case the Telecoms Ministry failed to secure the payment of US$1.6 million to the consortium responsible for the India-Middle East-Western Europe (IMEWE) international cable.[37] The issue was resolved at the last minute; some described it as political.[38]

The Lebanese government maintains a monopoly over the internet backbone, as well as over the fixed and mobile telephone industry in general, allowing it to exercise tight control over internet service providers (ISPs). The Lebanese telecommunications industry is government-owned and tightly regulated. Lebanon has two government-owned mobile phone companies, officially named Mobile Interim Company 1 and Mobile Interim Company 2. These operate respectively under the commercial names Alfa and Touch, which are run by the private companies Orascom Telecom Holdings and Zain, respectively.[39] Because the government sets prices and issues permits for the

29 Caretaker Telecoms Minister Nicolas Sehnaoui Facebook page, January 20, 2014, http://on.fb.me/1bEu47U.

30 Telecoms 2013 Progress Report, January 3, 2014, http://bit.ly/1oa28kP

31 Telecoms 2013 Progress Report, January 3, 2014, http://bit.ly/1oa28kP

32 Business Monitor International, "Lebanon Information Technology Report", December 13, 2013, http://bit.ly/1fSxC90.

33 Melki, J. (2010). Media Habits of MENA Youth: A Three–Country Survey.
Issam Fares Institute Youth in the Arab World Working Paper Series, 2(1), 3–50. http://bit.ly/9PVsQ3.

34 Sami Halabi. (2011, October 3). High Hopes and Higher Hurdles. http://www.executive-magazine.com/economics-and-policy/High-Hopes-and-Higher-Hurdles/3918

35 Naharnet, "Power Outages across Lebanon as Bad Weather Shuts Down Deir Amar Plant", May 14, 2013, http://bit.ly/1bj0wCp

36 The Daily Star, "Longer power cuts due to lack of funds: EDL", December 9, 2013, http://bit.ly/1eJfvWC.

37 MTV Lebanon, "Lebanon's Internet at Threat?", November 2, 2013, http://mtv.com.lb/en/News/269504.

38 Blog Baladi, "No Internet Outage in Lebanon", http://bit.ly/1eNmwnS.

39 Please see http://www.touch.com.lb/autoforms/portal/touch/about-touch/who-we-are/about-us and https://www.alfa.com.lb/aboutus/companyinfo.aspx.

number of subscriptions allowed, there is little competition in the industry and the two companies practically split the market evenly between themselves.[40] The fixed-line telephone and internet network is owned and operated by Ogero, a state company headed by Abdulmenaim Youssef. Ironically, Youssef also occupies a position within the Ministry of Telecommunications that oversees the operations of Ogero.

In addition to running the backbone, Ogero sets internet prices and shares in the management of online subscriptions, together with two dozen private ISPs.[41] Since no law regulates their licensing, private ISPs currently obtain a permit by decree from the Ministry of Telecommunications.[42] In addition, the government has significant control over the processing and approval of user applications for broadband services, which can usually take six to eight weeks. Crucially, political influence can significantly interfere with the allocation of contracts to private ISPs and mobile phone operators.[43]

Lebanese media and telecommunications laws are regulated by three semi-independent advisory bodies that report to the Council of Ministers. The National Council for Audiovisual Media and the Committee for Establishing Model Bylaws and Practices deal mainly with audiovisual media (TV, radio, and satellite), while the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) is responsible for liberalizing, regulating, and developing the telecommunications sector. Overall, the three bodies remain largely powerless and fail to live up to their expectations as independent regulators in a modern state. While in theory the TRA is independent from the government, in reality, dominant Lebanese political groups possess a great deal of influence over the institution, often rendering it powerless.[44] For this reason, the Ministry of Telecommunications remains the strongest player in the ICT domain. In fact, the past three telecommunications ministers have gone so far as to claim that the TRA has no real authority since the law establishing its powers has not yet been implemented.[45] Tellingly, since its launch in 2007, many of the TRA's objectives have not been met, namely the transition from analog to digital networks and the privatization of the telecommunications sector. The Lebanese national committee for transition to digital TV announced it has launched its work plan and its operations to complete the transition from analog to digital by June 17, 2015. Yasser Fneish, senior interconnection expert at TRA, noted that the committee is finalizing the request for proposal (RFP) to purchase the adequate equipment for the digital broadcasting network.[46] However, many of these issues will most likely be held up by political disputes and the more pressing security issues.

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40 The Business Year. (n.d.). Interview Marwan Hayek. The Next Step. http://www.thebusinessyear.com/publication/article/2/48/lebanon-2012/the-next-step.

41 Facts and Figures. (2011, December). Telecommunications Regulatory Authority. http://www.tra.gov.lb/Market-Data-Facts-and-figures.

42 According to the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), it is TRA's prerogative to assess and grant license to ISPs, but the past three ministers of telecommunication have considered that the TRA has no legal authority to do so, and the ministry has used an old law as a basis for their right to grant such license. See below for conflicts between the TRA and the Telecommunications Ministry.

43 Jad Melki, Yasmine Dabbous, Khaled Nasser and Sarah Mallat (2012). Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon, New York, NY: Open Society Foundation. http://www.soros.org/initiatives/media. p. 89.

44 Jad Melki, Yasmine Dabbous, Khaled Nasser and Sarah Mallat (2012). Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon, New York, NY: Open Society Foundation. http://www.soros.org/initiatives/media, pp. 34 and 82.

45 Sami Halabi. (2011, July 3). Redialing discord. Executive Magazine. http://www.executive-magazine.com/economics-and-policy/Redialing-discord/4770.

46 Yasser Fnesih, senior interconnection expert at the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, February 7,2014, Beirut, email interview.

Limits on Content

The past year has witnessed the most aggressive attempts by the Lebanese government to filter ICT content, although such filtering rarely relates to local political issues and is more commonly motivated by economic interests.[47] Social Media Exchange (SMEX) reported that 64 websites were blocked in 2013 and early 2014. The vast majority were gambling or adult escort services. However, the numbers included nine Israeli websites, and a news website that had reported an alleged child sexual abuse case by a Lebanese priest.[48] With some exceptions, most of the websites were only blocked temporarily, and some only by certain ISPs.[49] More importantly, the decisions to block these sites remain unclear and non-transparent. For example, the owners of the city guide beirut.com stated that ISPs Terranet and Sodetel both blocked their site in late December 2013. While they were notified that the telecoms minister requested a court order to block their site, the minister denied the claim. Later, Terranet removed the block but Sodetel kept it in place in January 2014.[50] These non-transparent and inconsistent filtering measures are due to the lack of laws governing internet policy.

YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and international blog-hosting services such as Wordpress and Blogger are freely available. In fact, Facebook, Google, YouTube, Microsoft's Live.com, Twitter, and Wikipedia rank among the top 10 most visited websites in Lebanon.[51]

While most social media and communication apps are available in Lebanon, certain Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) applications are blocked on an inconsistent basis in line with the 2002 Telecom Act.[52] In 2010, the government-owned phone company Ogero installed equipment to block VoIP throughout the network, but subsequently backed down under pressure from businesses, civil society, and politicians. It is important to note that VoIP services are mainly blocked because they cut into government revenues generated by international phone calls. Furthermore, only certain VoIP services are blocked, such as Vonage, while Skype is freely accessible. Blocking some VoIP applications is incurring Lebanon an annual income loss of US$100 million.[53] No clear government decision on the matter exists and the law banning VoIP remains in place, though its implementation remains vague and inconsistent. Recently, the telecoms ministry noted that it plans to allow the selling of VoIP services by private operators if they agree to share revenues with the state.[54] Government officials are arguably hesitant to engage in censorship out of fears that the moves could be seen as unfairly targeting one political-sectarian group. In the past, this has been shown

47 Imad Atalla. (2010. June 8). The Daily Star. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/Jun/08/Lebanon-is-stifling-your-digital-freedom.ashx.

48 Social Media Exchange, January 8, 2014, "Blocked Websites in Lebanon 2013", http://bit.ly/1eJjlPr.

49 The websites that remain blocked include the news website that reported an alleged child sexual abuse case by a Lebanese priest, all escort and prostitution websites, some poker and betting websites (www.fulltiltpoker.com, www.pokerstars.net, www.bet365.com/en, www.betfair.com, and www.williamhill.com), and some Israeli websites: Israeli Ministry of Defense, Israeli Security Authorities, International Management Institute university, Tel Aviv Stock Exchange, and the Israeli Air Force (note that some of these web sites are blocked by the Israeli source). In contrast, these websites were blocked temporarily: A gambling website (www.fring.com) and some Israeli websites (Israel Secret Intelligence service http://mosasad.gov.il, an Israeli website that provides employment resources http://nbn.org.il, and Rabbis for Human Rights http://rhr.org.il).

50 Transparency International, July 18, 2013, "Lebanon: Stopping Secrecy One Law at a Time", http://bit.ly/1iFSmnc

51 Alexa. (2013, March 1). Top Sites in Lebanon. http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LB.

52 Imad Atalla. (2010. June 8). The Daily Star. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/Jun/08/Lebanon-is-stifling-your-digital-freedom.ashx.

53 Telecoms 2013 Progress Report, January 3, 2014, http://bit.ly/1oa28kP.

54 Telecoms 2013 Progress Report, January 3, 2014, http://bit.ly/1oa28kP.

to quickly galvanize various groups against the government or the state security apparatus, causing unrest.

Although filtering remains rare, there have been limited incidents in which government security officials pressured individuals and ISPs to remove certain comments—mainly criticism of government officials or the army—from social media pages, blogs, or websites. Acting upon a court order, the Directorate for General Security has, in the past, pushed the administrators of Facebook groups to delete comments or close groups that are seen as defamatory. The military intelligence has also interrogated individuals for contacting a Lebanese man living in Israel through Facebook. In addition, intermediaries are legally liable for content posted by users, including domain hosting services and ISPs (for more on libel cases and the arrests of intermediaries, see "Violations of User Rights").

In a new development this year, Facebook management shut down several Lebanese pages for allegedly publishing Hezbollah-related content, including the Facebook pages "Enta Al-Khabar" (November 24, 2013), "Lebanon Debate" (November 27, 2013), and "Al-Jadeed Online" (November 28, 2013).[55] The latter belongs to a mainstream TV channel.

Despite the evidence of some online filtering, in general, taboo subjects that would normally be banned from mainstream media outlets, such as pornography, content supportive of Israel, and sectarian hate speech, are freely available online. Indeed, the two controversial anti-Islam videos, "The Innocence of Muslims" and "The Innocent Prophet," remain accessible, despite a September 24, 2012 court decision to ban access to the former in Lebanon.[56] Legal experts have expressed skepticism about the ability of authorities to implement such court orders.[57] A similar example is the Turkish "Fetih 1453" movie, which was deemed insulting to Christianity. It was banned from Lebanese theaters in October 2012 but remains available online.[58] The same goes for a French film featuring a gay couple, which was banned from theaters in October 2013.[59]

However, self-censorship is prominent in the blogosphere and in the country's top media outlets, which are owned by powerful figures from all sides of the political spectrum. Users often fear repercussions from the government or certain political and sectarian groups. On July 10, 2013, Hassan Baydoun, administrator of Bint Jbeil (bintjbeil.org), shut down the website for a day after he allegedly received threats from a Hezbollah member.[60] Farah Shaer, director of the short film "Wahabtoka Al Muta'h" (I offered you pleasure), also felt it was not safe to publish his film on YouTube after it was officially banned by the censorship bureau.[61]

55 Samir Kassir Eyes, "Press and Cultural Freedom Violations Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine October- November 2013", December 15, 2013, http://bit.ly/1ghDdHN.

56 Al-Jazeera Blogs. (Sept 25, 2012). Lebanese court decides to block internet access to anti-Islam video. http://blogs.aljazeera.com/topic/anti-islam-video-protests/lebanese-court-decides-block-internet-access-anti-islam-video.

57 Legal Agenda (Al-Mufakira Al-Kanouniya). (2012, October 1). A Lebanese judge interferes to stop the publication of the film "Innocent Prophet." http://www.legal-agenda.com/newsarticle.php?id=167&folder=legalnews&lang=ar, and Agence France Presse, "Lebanese court decides to block internet access to anti-Islam video," Al Jazeera English, (25 September 2012), http://blogs.aljazeera.com/topic/anti-islam-video-protests/lebanese-court-decides-block-internet-access-anti-islam-video.

58 The Daily Star, "Lebanon bans 'Fetih 1453' from theaters", October 8,2012, http://bit.ly/1oazAaN

59 Stephen Kalin, "Lebanon band two films in setback for tolerant image", Yahoo, October 7, 2013, http://yhoo.it/1ehGYsj.

60 Dani El-Amine, ""Intimidation" closes Bint Jbeil website", Al-Akhbar, July 11,2013, http://bit.ly/1ehHCpy.

61 Luna Safwan, "The "sensual" gets censored", NOW Lebanon, October 7, 2013, http://bit.ly/1f9rVSu; Anais Renevier, "Farah Shaer ,Lebanese director of I Offered You Pleasure", EuroMed Audiovisual, October 14, 2013, http://bit.ly/1ehJhM7

Contributing to this censorial culture were the numerous assassinations of journalists and politicians from 2005 to 2011, a period that witnessed significant shifts in power inside Lebanon. This climaxed with the high profile assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the subsequent withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. The more recent assassinations of high profile Hezbollah leaders, ranking Future Movement politicians, and journalists covering the Syria conflict has reminded Lebanese that this dark period is far from over. Nonetheless, even the most controversial topics are openly debated online. For example, although homosexuality remains taboo in Lebanon and laws criminalize "unnatural sexual relationships," LGBTI rights organizations continue to publish content online despite occasional harassment from security officials.[62] The July 2013 announcement by the Lebanese Psychiatric Society that homosexuality is not a mental disorder was widely circulated online.[63]

Online advertising in Lebanon grew by 29 percent in 2012,[64] but it remains weak, partly due to the slowness and unreliability of the internet. In addition, advertising agencies have yet to grasp the internet as an advertising platform and local websites remain ill-equipped to handle sophisticated online ads.[65] Whereas affluent politicians are known to purchase bulk subscriptions to newspapers and magazines in order to influence coverage, online advertising remains too small of a factor to be targeted by political groups and businesses. In fact, the majority of advertising revenue continues to go to television and other traditional media, while online sources make up two percent of the total advertising market.[66]

Lebanese users have access to a wide variety of local and international information sources. Reflecting Lebanon's pluralistic society, Lebanese media is highly partisan and controlled by the dominant political-sectarian actors, mainly through direct ownership of prominent media outlets.[67] For example, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri owns Future TV, *al-Mustaqbal*, *the Daily Star*, and a host of other online and offline media outlets. Similarly, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri owns National Broadcasting Network and its affiliates, while Hezbollah controls a vast network of media outlets, including al-Manar TV and al-Nour radio. The heads of these media outlets are chosen by these dominant political figures and their news content clearly advances a particular partisan message. While ensuring plurality, this also creates a climate in which the public sphere is dominated by the agendas of the powerful political-sectarian leaders and their allies, suffocating the voices of those who fall outside the main groups.[68] At the same time, politicians are known to bribe the few independent news outlets and journalists that do exist, particularly during election periods.

Civil society groups have used social media widely and effectively to mobilize support for their causes. Women's right groups, such as Nasawiya and Kafa, have been successful in attracting media attention, mobilizing grassroots support, and achieving changes in discriminatory laws

62 See www.helem.net.

63 The Daily Star, "Homosexuality not a mental disorder: Psychiatric Society", July 12, 2013, http://bit.ly/LPHhUk.

64 The Daily Star, "Lebanon online advertising spending rises by 29 percent", February 11, 2013, http://bit.ly/LPHVRP

65 Elias Sakr. (2012, April 20). Online Advertising untapped in Lebanon, The Daily Star, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Lebanon/2012/Apr-20/170785-online-advertising-untapped-in-lebanon.ashx

66 Sakr, "Online Advertising Untapped in Lebanon."

67 Jad Melki, Yasmine Dabbous, Khaled Nasser, and Sarah Mallat. (2012). Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon, New York, NY: Open Society Foundation. http://www.soros.org/initiatives/media. pp. 21-22.

68 Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon, pp. 56-58.

and regulations.[69] Their online efforts, combined with strategic litigation and advocacy, led to the implementation of tougher sentences for "honor crimes" in 2011,[70] and the passing of an albeit diluted law on domestic violence in April 2014.[71] Lately, KAFA launched an electronic campaign that aims to collect e-signatures to petition the Lebanese president to refer the domestic violence law back to Parliament.

Furthermore, individual online initiatives have scored victories in crowd-funding for social and humanitarian causes. For example, one day after the library of Father Ibrahim Sarrouj, a Greek orthodox priest who has the second largest book collection in Lebanon, was torched in the northern city of Tripoli, filmmaker Mutaz Salloum started a Facebook event with a group of his friends with the aim of raising $35,000 for rebuilding and restocking the library.[72] According to the "Enough Silence: Public Mobilization to Restore Lebanon's Historical al-Sa'eh Library" campaign, $30,173 was collected as of February 6, 2014. [73] Another campaign that brought Lebanese together was "I am NOT a martyr."[74] The online campaign did not succeed in stopping car bombs, but it did spread a strong message against the normalization of explosions and was widely covered by local and international media.[75]

In addition, civil society organizations have been successful in halting the passage of two problematic online media laws through online campaigning. Activists and businesses delayed and eventually canceled a parliamentary vote on the highly-restrictive "e-transaction law" in June 2010.[76] In March 2012, a similar campaign to "Stop LIRA," the Lebanese Internet Regulation Act proposed by the Ministry of Information, led to a halt in deliberations on the law (for more on the e-transactions law and LIRA, please see "Violations of User Rights" below).

Digital activists were also able to achieve a breakthrough concerning press freedom in Lebanon. On September 17, 2013, in a response to a Facebook call from the journalist Diana Moukalled, several journalists and activists gathered outside a court to support journalist Mohannad Hajj Ali, accused of defamation and inciting sectarian hate (See "Violation of Users Rights"). Due to pressure from activists, his case was successfully transferred to the judiciary, and his lawyer was able to accompany him to subsequent interrogations. Journalists who face similar accusations in the future may be able to use his case as precedent.[77]

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69 Jad Melki and Sara Mallat. (2013). Digital Activism: Efficacies and Burdens of Social Media for Civic Activism in Lebanon. Unpublished manuscript.

70 Human Rights Watch. (2011). Lebanon: Law reform targets 'honor' crimes. http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/08/11/lebanon-law-reform-targets-honor-crimes.

71 Zeinab Merhi, "Lebanon Domestic Violence Law: A "Cosmetic" Gain for Women?", Al Akhbar, July 24, 2013, http://bit.ly/1npwhJH; Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Domestic Violence Law Good, but Incomplete", April 3, 2014, http://goo.gl/akWq4n.

72 Mairi Mackay, "Cross-faith crowd-funding helps rebuild torched Lebanon library", CNN, February 4,2014, http://cnn.it/1fH9EQi.

73 "Enough Silence: Public Mobilization to Restore Lebanon's Historical al-Sa'eh Library" facebook campaign http://on.fb.me/1fYSkGA.

74 "I am NOT a martyr" facebook page http://on.fb.me/1ggq81t.

75 Mohammed Jamjoom, "Outraged Lebanese protest teenager's death with #nomartyr campaign ", CNN, January 23,2014, http://cnn.it/LPJYFB; BBC Trending, "#BBCtrending: Lebanon's #notamartyr selfie protest", http://bbc.in/1f9jgFG.

76 S. Malo. (2010, August 23). Where online activism meets offline action. The Daily Star. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Spotlight/Aug/23/Where-online-activism-meets-offline-action.ashx.

77 Meris Lutz, "Journalist scores victory as case transferred from ISF cybercrime unit", The Daily Star, September 18, 2013, http://bit.ly/1f9vWGt.

Online mobilization has more recently been used to advance prisoners' rights. In November 2013, an unidentified prisoner created a Twitter account and a Facebook page for Roumieh prison, highlighting corruption at the prison and exposing the deteriorating conditions from which prisoners suffer.[78] However, not all digital activists have been successful. One of the most publicized failures pertains to the ongoing anti-sectarianism campaign, which took off in 2011 and so far has not achieved any of its goals and has failed to mobilize a critical mass of supporters in the country.[79] Failures in this domain, however, were not related to censorship, but rather to organizational challenges.

Violations of User Rights

An absence of laws governing online media, increasing pressure on journalists by the Cybercrime Bureau, and cyberattacks against political or social websites constituted a grave threat to user rights over the past year. Users do not generally undergo a full legal prosecution in the country; rather, prominent figures are summoned and interrogated by the security forces for expressing political views online. This is mainly related to criticism of army officials, although users have also faced interrogations for defaming private companies. The pervasive power of the security forces is also apparent in the realm of surveillance, where blanket requests for user data have resulted in high profile political disputes between rival factions.

The Lebanese constitution guarantees freedom of expression as well as freedom of the press, although those rights have not always been respected in practice. Violations of press freedom typically receive an immediate and passionate reaction from the public, serving as a powerful check against the government's actions in this domain. However, no specific provisions in these pre-internet era laws relate to online speech, and many have been anticipating a new law for over a decade. Meanwhile, courts apply these and other traditional media laws to the online sphere in an inconsistent and often contradictory fashion.[80] This has produced a confusing legal environment with overlapping jurisdictions and contradictory laws governing online content, including the civil laws, the penal code, the Publications Law, the Audiovisual Law, the elections law, and the military code of justice.[81] Three serious attempts to develop new media laws have generated heated national debates in the past three years, although so far, none have generated any concrete results.[82]

Firstly, the e-transactions law, proposed in 2010, required "anyone providing online services" to apply for a license, allowed for "warrantless search and seizure" of information and equipment, and proposed a licensing and regulatory body with broad unchecked powers over e-commerce companies.[83] In early 2012, the Ministry of Interior proposed the Lebanese Internet Regulation Act

78 LBCI, "Roumieh prison enters social media world", November 24, 2013, http://bit.ly/1eJurnL.

79 Simona Sikimic. (2011, May 16). Laique demonstrators call for secular state. The Daily Star. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2011/May-16/Laique-demonstrators-call-for-secular-state.ashx.

80 Jad Melki, Yasmine Dabbous, Khaled Nasser, and Sarah Mallat. (2012). Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon, New York, NY: Open Society Foundation. http://www.soros.org/initiatives/media. p. 86.

81 Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon, p. 86.

82 Media Sustainability Index. (2010/2011). The development of sustainable independent media in Lebanon. http://www.irex.org/project/media-sustainability-index-msi-middle-east-north-africa.

83 Social Media Exchange. (2010, June 14). Tage archives: E-transactions law. http://www.smex.org/tag/e-transactions-law.

(LIRA), which applied the archaic 1962 Press and Publications Law to websites and their employees.[84] Although LIRA was seen as less problematic than the e-transactions law, it included enough vague language and restrictions to evoke fears of broad censorship.[85] For example, LIRA prohibited the publishing of "immoral content," including matters related to gambling, and did not define which websites were defined as "information websites" and thus were required to register.[86] LIRA also prohibited users from managing more than one website at a time and banned anyone convicted of a "heinous misdemeanor or felony" from owning one altogether. As mentioned, both the e-transactions law and LIRA were halted under public pressure. [87]

In contrast, the law recently proposed by the Maharat Foundation was drafted through engagement with various ICT stakeholders and attempts to uphold democratic rights.[88] Nevertheless, the Maharat proposal has garnered some resistance, mainly from the Lebanese Press Federation, which sees it as a threat to its authority.[89] In contrast to the two previously mentioned bills, the Maharat law attempts to regulate print, broadcast, internet, and mobile media, thereby unifying the two main laws that currently regulate the media industry: the 1962 press and publications laws and the 1994 audiovisual law. The Maharat law also abolishes provisions that currently allow for the precautionary detention of journalists "convicted for libelous violations," removes the distinction between political and non-political media, and no longer requires newspapers to obtain a license.[90] The draft law has been stuck in the Lebanese parliament's telecommunications committee since the government collapsed in early 2013, but even with the new government in place, Maharat activists note that there is no political will at the moment to push this draft law forth. The Arab ICT organization Ijma3 is leading an initiative to study ICT laws in Lebanon and the Arab world and later compare them with ICT laws in the European Union in order to recommend best practices and laws for ICT in Lebanon.[91]

From a legal perspective, the most serious threat to internet users and online journalists remains the country's slander and libel laws. Under Article 588 of the Lebanese penal code, defaming the president carries a sentence of 3 to 12 months, while defaming the army or other public figures carries a sentence of up to 6 months.[92] The appeals process is often drawn out and highly politicized. In practice, however, most online users targeted with such accusations are quickly released and the cases are usually forgotten or dropped under public or political pressure. However, even if the cases tend to wither away with little or no legal action, they almost always generate heated public debates and protests. In the recent past, a handful of cases caught the attention of the media and wider public.

84 OnterNet Blog. (2012, March 19). L.I.R.A: Minister's v/s Legal Point of View. http://blog.ontornet.org/?p=335.

85 Jillian York. (2012, April 2). Proposed Laws in Lebanon and Iraq Threaten Online Speech. Electronic Frontier Foundation. https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2012/03/proposed-laws-lebanon-iraq-threaten-online-speech.

86 OnterNet Blog. (2012, March 19). L.I.R.A: Minister's v/s Legal Point of View. http://blog.ontornet.org/?p=335.

87 Samir Kassir eyes. (2012, April 11). Activists, Bloggers Stop Lebanese Internet Regulation Act, for Now. http://www.skeyesmedia.org/en/a/Articles/Activists-Bloggers-Stop-Lebanese-Internet-Regulation-Act-for-Now.

88 Article 19. (2009). Draft Law Amending the Press Law of Lebanon. http://www.article19.org/pdfs/analysis/lebanon-amending-the-press-law-of-lebanon.pdf.

89 The Daily Star. (2013, April 24). Maharat lashes back at Press Federation over draft law. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2013/Apr-24/214825-maharat-lashes-back-at-press-federation-over-draft-law.ashx.

90 The Daily Star, "Maharat lashes back at Press Federation over draft law"

91 Ijma3, "Ijma3 leading an EU-funded initiative to studying ICT legislation in Lebanon and the Arab world", January 30, 2014, http://bit.ly/1h3YU1y.

92 See: http://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/article.asp?ln=ar&id=25540.

Political leaders and state officials have often abused the slander law to intimidate and silence journalists, especially the archaic laws that forbid insulting the president. This has been bolstered this year by the growing power and activities of the Lebanese Cyber Crime and Intellectual Property Rights Bureau (Cybercrime Bureau) in summoning and interrogating online journalists and bloggers. Online journalists and bloggers are often summoned and interrogated by the Cybercrime Bureau in contravention of the publications law, which "bans security investigations of journalists and requires that such investigations [be] conducted by a judge, in the presence of a lawyer, and away from police stations." Activists fear this practice increases self-censorship and suppresses freedom of expression online. The Legal Agenda, an NGO focusing on legal issues, highlighted "the danger of assigning separate bodies to investigate online as opposed to offline activities," which will deny online journalists the legal guarantees afforded to offline journalists. It also called on the government "to limit the Bureau's powers to technical expertise and knowledge that supports the judiciary" and put a stop to their practices of summoning and interrogating people who publish online.[93]

On June 18, 2013, the Cybercrime Bureau summoned Jean Assy to answer for insulting the President on Twitter. Assy said he was also interrogated over tweets he wrote in which he was critical of Prime Minister Najib Mikati, former prime minister Saad Hariri, and Interior Minister Marwan Charbel.[94] He was released on bail, but in February 2014 the publications court sentenced him to two months in prison.[95] A few days later, Assy wrote a public apology to the president.[96]

On September 11, 2013, the Cybercrime Bureau summoned Rasha al-Amine after she posted on her Facebook page an article calling Samir Geagea a murderer.[97] Al-Amine was interrogated for four and a half hours before being released without charges.[98] Two weeks earlier, journalist Lokman Slim was interrogated for more than four hours for posting the same article, which had been previously published by *Almuhasaba*, a news website.[99] Journalist Mohanad Hage Ali was also summoned by the Cybercrime Bureau for sharing the article, and was accused of defamation and inciting sectarian strife. His case has been transferred to the judiciary for review.[100]

On January 21, 2014, Lebanese army intelligence officers interrogated Bilal Hussein, an engineer and activist from Tripoli, because he shared and promoted on his Facebook page a cartoon, published by the Beirut Observer, which criticized army commander Jean Kahwaji. Hussein says he was detained for six hours and kept in harsh conditions. He noted that they tied his hands, blindfolded him, kept him standing, and subjected him to intimidation and insults.[101]

The Cybercrime Bureau also detains users for libel allegations against private companies. For

93 The Legal Agenda, "Lebanon's Cybercrime Bureau: A License to Censor?" February 27, 2014, http://goo.gl/jgKx7H.

94 Marc Abizeid, "Lebanon detains man for insulting president over twitter", June 18, 2013, http://bit.ly/1f9qbsl.

95 Al Modon, "Publications court finds Jean Assy guilty" (Arabic), February 12, 2014, http://goo.gl/ak2CPK.

96 Annahar, "Jean Assy apologizes to the president" (Araibc), February 18, 2014, http://goo.gl/Oxl2TD.

97 Geagea is the leader of the Christian right-wing Lebanese Forces political party and a former militia commander.

98 Samir Kassir Eyes, "Press and Cultural Freedom Violations Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, September 2013", October 10, 2013, http://bit.ly/1dcjvxb.

99 Samir Kassir Eyes, "The Cybercrimes bureau summons the writer Lokman Slim and interrogates him for four hours", August 28, 2013, http://bit.ly/1h42N6J.

100 Meris Lutz, "Journalist scores victory as case transferred from ISF cybercrime unit", The Daily Star, September 18, 2013, http://bit.ly/1f9vWGt.

101 The Daily Star, "Army briefly detains activist over 'offensive' cartoon", January 23, 2014, http://bit.ly/M5lc52.

example, blogger Rita Kamel was interrogated in August 2013 over a January 2013 blog post in which she criticized the Pan Arab Web Awards Academy. She was accused of slander and libel but later released after signing a pledge not to repeat the offense.[102] Similarly, the bureau detained blogger Gino Raidy on January 29, 2014 for two and a half hours, without the presence of a lawyer. On June 8, 2013, he had written about cube7, a local subsidiary of an international e-commerce solutions company named Bonofa.[103] Raidy was accused of defaming Bonofa and was later released after signing a commitment not to use slanderous terms on his blog.[104] This is despite the fact that the bureau stated, on September 17, 2013, that they would no longer detain bloggers, journalists, and activists for interrogation.

On November 25, 2013, Rami Aysha, a freelance reporter for Spiegel Online, was sentenced to six months in prison by a Beirut military court for charges of smuggling firearms.[105] His sentence was later reduced to two weeks. Aysha says he was working on a story about arms trafficking when he was arrested on August 30, 2012 and allegedly tortured while in detention.[106] The precise circumstances behind his arrest remain unclear.

Media reports highlighted numerous cases of extralegal violence and threats against activists and bloggers in late 2013 and early 2014. On May 14, 2013, blogger Habib Battah said he was physically assaulted for taking pictures of historic ruins at a construction site in downtown Beirut. Several men attacked and forced him to erase the photos. When he reported it to a local police station, the officers advised him to forget the issue since he did not have any witnesses.[107] On June 28, 2013, while Nasawiya feminist activists were having a farewell party, the bodyguards of member of parliament (MP) Nadim Gemayael demanded them not to take photographs as MP Gemayal was in the vicinity and threatened the activists with their guns.[108] On November 26, 2013, several online activists and journalists gathered to protest the arrest of the crew of al-Jadeed channel's "Taht Ta'ilat el Masooliya" (Subject to Accountability) TV show. Customs security agents ended up physically assaulting the protesters.[109]

In addition, several online journalists and activists received death threats on their social media accounts. For example, on March 20, 2013, activist Rami Olleik received death threats on Facebook warning him not to give an interview to Future TV. Journalist Ramez El-Kadi from Al-Jadeed TV received similar threats on Twitter. [110]

102 Rita Kamel blog, "My interrogation with the Cyber Crime Bureau –The case of the Pan Arab Web Awards Academy ", August 2013, http://bit.ly/1iR5F3x.

103 Maharat News, "The extraordinary Gino in front of the cyber crimes bureau", January 29, 2014, http://bit.ly/1iKT6K7.

104 Gino Raidy blog, "The Details of What Happened With Me at the Cybercrime Bureau", January 30,2014, http://bit.ly/1bB4osA.

105 Committee to Protect Journalists, "Lebanon must release journalist accused of arms trafficking", February 5,2013, http://bit.ly/1bFG3SG.

106 Reporters without Borders, "Freed from detention but still facing charges", October 2,2012, http://bit.ly/1fZE3cE.

107 The Beirut Report, "Getting physically assaulted today at District S site", May 14, 2013, http://bit.ly/1dd3qal

108 Samya Kullab, "MP Gemayal and Nasawiya remain at odds after violent row", The Daily Star, July 1,2013, http://bit.ly/1fUga3X.

109 Naharnet, "Al-Jadeed Crew Freed after being Beaten, Detained by Customs Agents in Downtown Beirut", November 26,2013, http://bit.ly/1eiDrdn.

110 Samir Kassir Eyes, "Press and Cultural Freedom Violations Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine October-November 2013", December 15, 2013, http://bit.ly/1ghDdHN.

In a new and unprecedented development this year, Twitter revealed that the Lebanese government has requested information about the identity of specific online users. Twitter complied with 67 percent of the requests.[111] Stories of more extralegal methods used to identify anonymous online users also abound. These cases tend to be low profile and are often underreported out of fears of public embarrassment or due to government intimidation. One well-publicized case from 2000 pertains to Gay Lebanon, a pro-LGBTI rights website. Lebanese vice police tried to force Ziad Mughraby, the owner of the local ISP Destination and son of a human rights lawyer, to reveal the names of the website's owners. Kamal Batal, director of the human rights organization MIRSAD, subsequently emailed a letter of protest to raise awareness about the issue. Under a military tribunal, both he and Mughraby were convicted of defaming the army and forced to pay a fine of US$219 each.[112]

Currently, Lebanese law does not place restrictions on online anonymity or encryption software. However, there have been reports that the draft media laws currently being debated behind closed doors in parliament do require some form of registration for news websites, similar to the LIRA proposal. According to an order issued by the public prosecutor's office on June 7 2013, ISPs are to save all internet log files for a period of one year. The requested data include the username, the user's IP address, the websites the user is connected to, the user's location, and the protocols used in the user's online activity.[113] Prepaid mobile phones can be easily purchased around the country without any ID requirements.

The incoming minister of telecom Botrous Harb decided to cancel the mandatory registration of new mobile phones entering the country, a move that was opposed by local mobile phone importers and vendors.[114] His predecessor Nicolas Sehnaoui had implemented the IMEI (International Mobile Station Equipment Identity) registration requirement in early 2013 in order to counter mobile phones smuggling. Mobile phone networks use the IMEI to identify stolen or smuggled phones.

The issue of surveillance has garnered much public debate and controversy over the past eight years, which witnessed devastating violence and major political shifts, including a chain of political assassinations (mainly 2005-2008), a 30-day war with Israel (2006), a small-scale civil war (2008), and a political climate that continues to divide the country into two large blocks: the "March 14 Alliance" and the "March 8 Alliance."[115] At issue was the widespread and aggressive surveillance and private data acquisition by the Information Branch of the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF), the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission (UNIIIC), and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), which were responsible for investigating the assassinations, particularly that of the

111 Twitter, (2013, July 1 – Dec 31) "Information Requests" https://transparency.twitter.com/information-requests/2013/jul-dec

112 Jad Melki, Yasmine Dabbous, Khaled Nasser, and Sarah Mallat. (2012). Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon, New York, NY: Open Society Foundation. http://www.soros.org/initiatives/media. p. 86-7.

113 Matt Nash, "Providers tracking customers' Internet use", NOW Lebanon, November 29, 2013, http://bit.ly/1eJzWCH.

114 The Daily Star. (2014, May 10). Harb calls for committee to discuss IMEI registration. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Lebanon/2014/May-10/255931-harb-calls-for-committee-to-discuss-imei-registration.ashx

115 The past eight years have witnessed major shifts in Lebanese politics, which were triggered by the high-profile assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 that prompted massive protests and forced Syrian troops out of Lebanon, thereby changing the balance of power. These events created two major political camps: the March 8 Alliance that included Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement, and was viewed as supportive of Syria and Iran, and the March 14 Alliance that included the Future Movement, the Progressive Socialist Party and the Lebanese Forces, and was seen as opposed to Syria and allied with the USA.

late prime minister Rafik Hariri in 2005.[116] The three organizations enjoyed almost free access to private data between 2005 and 2008, collecting sources as diverse as university transcripts, medical history, and mobile phone records in the name of national security. Their work was largely facilitated by Marwan Hmadeh, the ranking March 14 member and telecommunications minister from 2005 to 2008, himself a survivor of a 2004 assassination attempt.

In general, the laws regulating legal surveillance and the acquisition of communications data are vague and widely disputed. Attempts to develop clear privacy laws and regulations have failed, mainly because of their highly politicized nature. Currently, the typical process for acquiring user data involves a request from the ISF to the Ministry of Interior (or from the army to the Ministry of Defense), which is then sent to the prime minister for approval. The order is then sent to the telecommunications minister for execution—although in some instances the latter has refused to hand over the data to the ISF. This process was approved by the cabinet of ministries in 2009 as part of an agreement to share communication data with security and military officials. However, those who dispute this process, particularly the last three telecommunications ministers, cite the need to obey privacy laws and insist that the government's 2009 decision is limited to metadata and does not cover requests for the content of communications transactions and other specific data. During their respective periods in office, the ministers argued that large-scale, broad requests from the ISF should be accompanied by a court order.

For example, in December 2012, then-telecommunications minister Nicolas Sehnaoui revealed that the ISF had requested an expansive amount of information on Lebanese citizens for a two-month period of time.[117] In a Facebook post, he called upon "all bloggers, e-journalists, Tweeters and Facebook users and all members of our social media community" to pressure the council of ministers to reject the ISF request.[118] In total, three ministers have had conflicts with the ISF and Prime Minister Najib Mikati,[119] who has struggled to appease both sides and present himself as an independent leader.[120] Most recently, the incoming Cabinet of Ministers approved in its first meeting the handing over to security agencies of telecoms data of all Lebanese, despite strong objections from the March 8 alliance.[121] The politicization of these issues and the failure of any attempts to institute clear regulations remain the most serious problems when it comes to online privacy protection.

In addition, reports of Israeli attempts to infiltrate Lebanon's telecommunications system abound. Over the past four years, several employees working for mobile and fixed phone operators were arrested for allegedly carrying out clandestine intelligence activities for Israel.[122] There were also

116 The UNIIC and later the STL, which were established to investigate the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, were later accused of collecting private data not relevant to the investigation, including medical records from a local gynecological clinic that is frequented by the wives of many Hezbollah members.

117 See: http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2013/Feb-21/207288-telecoms-data-requests-violate-constitution.ashx#axzz2RqKY4Jq6.

118 See: http://www.facebook.com/Nicolas.Sehnaoui/posts/10152314217230285.

119 Sami Halabi. (2011, July 3). Redialing discord. Executive Magazine. http://www.executive-magazine.com/economics-and-policy/Redialing-discord/4770.

120 (Acting) Prime Minister Najib Mikati resigned March 2013, partly due to a controversy over the term extension for the ISF chief, which Mikati supported and the March 8 alliance opposed.

121 Daily Star. (2014, March 27). Lebanon's new Cabinet holds first meeting. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Mar-27/251431-lebanons-new-cabinet-holds-first-meeting.ashx

122 Sami Halabi. (2011, July 3). Redialing discord. Executive Magazine. http://www.executive-magazine.com/economics-and-policy/Redialing-discord/4770.

numerous reports about spying devices discovered on the network.[123] On November 6, 2013, Lebanese speaker of parliament Nabih Berri said that Israel installed spying equipment along its border with Lebanon. MP Hasan Fadlallah said that there are now 39 listening posts which are able to listen to people's phone conversations and track people holding their mobile phones. On January 8, 2014, Lebanon filed a complaint to the UN regarding Israeli espionage.[124] Moreover, attempts by the ISF to install and operate surveillance technologies have apparently been halted recently.[125] In fact, a public debate about illegal phone lines, surveillance, and privacy ensued after a May 2011 confrontation between former minister of telecommunications Charbel Nahas and the ISF. The controversy was triggered after members of the ISF blocked the minister and his team from entering a ministry building to dismantle a non-commercial mobile network which was allegedly used by the ISF for intelligence purposes, without government sanctioning or TRA supervision.[126]

When it comes to cybercafes, operators have only a few requirements by which they must abide, including registering their business with the Ministry of Finance for tax purposes and ensuring that all software used in their machines is legal and licensed. Interviewed operators of cybercafes said other matters are left to their own discretion and no special requirements to aid the government exist. Customers are not obliged to register and no monitoring software is installed on machines. They do, however, use firewalls and filters to block pornographic websites, particularly to protect children—a matter that caught media attention in April 2006 and led to the addition of such provisions to the proposed e-transactions law.

In Lebanon, cybersecurity is not governed by legislation. Thus, the country lacks a strategy for immunizing itself against cyberattacks.[127] Cyberattacks are on the rise in Lebanon, especially those emanating from outside of the country. Over the past year, several government and news websites were attacked multiple times. For example, on June 21, 2013, Raise Your Voice (RYV) hacked the website of the Lebanese parliament and posted an event calling for a sit-in outside the parliament to denounce the parliament's term extension.[128] RYV activists had struck multiple times in 2012 and hacked over a dozen government websites.[129] These attacks—seemingly initiated by a local Lebanese group—often consist of posting comments criticizing the government for its economic and developmental policies, especially in relation to the electricity shortage and the increasing poverty.[130]

The spillover effects of the Syrian conflict also impinged on the Lebanese ICT sphere. In early 2013, groups from Kuwait and Syria hacked the websites of the Lebanese parliament and interior ministry,

123 Sami Halabi. (2011, Jan 3). Broad band's roadblock. Executive Magazine. http://www.executive-magazine.com/special-report/Broadbands-roadblock/680.

124 The Daily Star, "Lebanon files complaint to U.N. over Israeli spying", January 8,2014, http://bit.ly/1h4FV70

125 Sami Halabi. (2011, Jan 3). Broad band's roadblock. Executive Magazine. http://www.executive-magazine.com/special-report/Broadbands-roadblock/680

126 Sami Halabi. (2011, Jan 3). Broad band's roadblock. Executive Magazine.

127 Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, "Cybersecurity in Lebanon", http://bit.ly/1eiJpe0

128 Annahar, "Hacking of the House of Representatives' website", June 21, 2013, http://bit.ly/1bUiUf5

129 Naharnet. (2012, April 17). 'Raise Your Voice' Hacks 15 Lebanese Government Sites. http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/37035; Naharnet. (2012, April 26). RYV Hacks Lebanese Govt. Sites Again, Enables Facebook Users to Post Messages. http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/38244.

130 Justin Salhani. (2012, June 6). Two Lebanese government websites hacked. The Daily Star. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2012/Jun-16/177091-two-lebanese-government-websites-hacked.ashx.

respectively, to criticize Lebanese support,[131] or cooperation with, the Syrian government.[132] There were also news reports of cyberattacks against Lebanese banks and financial institutions,[133] with some experts noting the attacks may have been state-sponsored and aimed at disrupting Syrian and Iranian finances.[134]

The online news industry has also been a popular target of such attacks. Most recently, the websites of *Arrouwad* newspaper (April 11, 2013),[135] Murr TV (April 16, 2013), NBN TV (August 3, 2013[136]), and Lebanon24 (December 29, 2013) came under attack.[137] *Trella*, a blog about free speech, social justice, and human rights in Lebanon,[138] lost 10 years of content after it was hacked on April 10, 2014.[139] The most significant case remains hijacking of *al-Mustaqbal* newspaper's home page on April 10, 2013. In a politically motivated attempt to discredit the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), hackers posted the names of alleged witnesses in the Rafik Hariri assassination trial.[140] Some journalists' personal web sites and social media pages have also suffered from such attacks, such as Paula Yacoubian's Facebook page (January 18, 2013).[141]

There has been an increase in number of attacks on the websites and the online communication tools of political parties, civil society groups, activists and—most recently—clerics. Such incidents include the attacks on the websites of the Palestinian journalists' association (June 18, 2013),[142] and the Independence Movement (April 19, 2013).[143] On June 30, 2013, the website of the MP Nadim Gemayel was hacked and a video was posted showing a clash between the MP's bodyguards and Nasawiya activists. Under the video, a statement read "Lock up your dogs", in reference to the MP's bodyguards.[144] On December 29, 2013, the Twitter account of Al-Moustaqbal movement Secretary General Ahmad Hariri was hacked. The hackers posted a sectarian tweet that stated, "No one will be able to defeat Sunnis in Lebanon. We will continue in our path till the end and you will not be able to terrorize us,"[145] along with a picture featuring the late Arab leaders Saddam Hussein, Yasser Arafat,

131 The Daily Star. (2013, February 23). Lebanese Parliament website hacked. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2013/Feb-23/207634-lebanese-parliament-website-hacked.ashx.

132 NOW Lebanon, "Syrian rebels hack Lebanese interior ministry's website", March 2, 2013, http://bit.ly/1aOpBEs.

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Jamal Abdul Nasser, and Rafik Hariri.[146] On January 24, 2014, "Hizb Shabibet Lobnan Al-Arabi", a political movement, claimed its site was hacked by a Syrian anti-government group.[147] Most recently, Bkerke, the website of the Maronite patriarchate, was hacked on April 15, 2014.[148] Such cyberattacks are likely to further increase given the controversial topics these political groups champion.

Many of these cyberattacks are dealt with promptly, though the perpetrators are seldom identified and detained. In one reported incident, the Cybercrime Bureau apprehended two Lebanese hackers accused of breaking into emails and Facebook accounts, stealing their owners' identities, and blackmailing them for ransom.[149] The increase in similar hacking attacks and blackmail attempts has alarmed Lebanese security officials, who remain poorly equipped to deal with them.[150]

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