



## **FREEDOM OF THE PRESS 2008**

### **Jordan**

**Status: Not Free**

**Legal Environment: 21**

**Political Environment: 24**

**Economic Environment: 18**

**Total Score: 63**

Jordan's media suffers from oppressive media legislation, informal pressure from the intelligence services, and cautious advertisers and printers afraid of running afoul of the government. In addition to constitutional guarantees of the right to freedom of expression and of the press, the Parliament approved a new Press and Publications Law on March 21 that explicitly prohibits "detention as a result of the enunciation of an opinion in speech, writing, or through other means." Nevertheless, the new law drastically increased fines to up to 28,000 dinars (USD\$40,000) for speech that offends religious beliefs, offends the prophets, or slanders the government. Journalists may also still be prosecuted under the penal code that allows for imprisonment up to three years for defaming the king or royal family. Although, in practice, limited criticism of the government and its allies is often tolerated, as is speech in favor of Islamist movements. Journalists must be members of the Jordan Press Association (JPA) to work legally. In the past, critical journalists have been excluded from the JPA and prevented from practicing their profession.

Intelligence agencies watch journalists closely, and the government of former Prime Minister Ma'ruf al-Bakhit, whom Nadir al-Dahabi replaced on November 25, gave free rein to intelligence officials, the police, and prosecutors to clamp down on legitimate speech. As a result of government threats of fines or prosecution, many journalists practiced self-censorship. Editors and journalists claim to have received official warnings to refrain from publishing certain articles and avoid certain topics, and security officials have pressured printers to delay publications until editors agree to remove sensitive stories. On April 18, security officers confiscated videotapes from an Al-Jazeera journalist containing an interview with former Crown Prince Hassan bin Talal in which he criticized Saudi and U.S. policies in the Middle East. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), security agents banned the April 30 edition of the weekly *Al-Majd* because of a front-page story about a "secret American plan" to topple the Hamas government in the occupied Palestinian territories with the connivance of "unnamed Arab parties." Fahd al-Rimawi, the paper's editor, told CPJ he reached an agreement with the security services whereby he ran the story in the paper's next edition, but off the front

page. In both cases of censorship, the government claimed to be acting out of fear of harming relations with neighboring countries.

The media was also subject to physical violence and harassment at the hands of state security officials. In January, Khaled al-Khawaja, a journalist with the pro-government daily *al-Ra'i*, filed a criminal complaint against a public security officer alleging that the officer assaulted him while he was trying to cover the disbursement of government meat rations. The officer responded by filing a counter-complaint, and in February, Khawaja was arrested and charged with assaulting a public security officer. State security officers also assaulted a journalist and a cameraman from the Al-Ghad TV station, Aubaida Dammur and Fady Ramhy, in April as they attempted to cover a bus strike in Amman.

The government owns substantial shares in Jordan's two leading daily newspapers, and all publications must obtain licenses from the state. There are high taxes on the media industry and tariffs on paper, and the government has been criticized for advertising primarily in newspapers in which it owns a stake. In 2003, the government officially gave up its monopoly on domestic television and radio broadcasting by creating the Audiovisual Licensing Authority, which in 2004 began to license and regulate private radio and television outlets. While the first privately-owned television station ATV was licensed two years ago, it is still in its pilot stage and has not been allowed to start broadcasting. The country's state-run Jordan Television and Radio serves mostly as a mouthpiece for the government. The new Press and Publications Law requires the licensing of publications and provides the courts with the right to withhold publication of any printed material, as well as the power to withdraw licenses. However, the new law does limit the government's ability to shut down printing presses. No restrictions are placed on satellite broadcasts, and satellite dishes continue to proliferate. The Jordanian government is actively seeking to promote access to the Internet and claims to place no restrictions on the roughly 13 percent of the population who access it. However, online publications became subject to press law on September 25, and on October 9, former MP and head of the Jordan National Movement, Ahmad Oweidi Abbadi, was sentenced to two years in prison by a state security court for posting material on his party's website. Abbadi had been detained in May on charges of "slandering a public official" and spreading false news abroad that "would impair the prestige of the state," based on a complaint from the interior minister who took offense to a letter Abbadi openly posted on the Internet to U.S. Senator Harry Reid accusing the minister and other government officials of corruption.