

Jordan

	2014	2015		
Internet Freedom Status	Partly Free	Partly Free	Population:	7.6 million
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	12	12	Internet Penetration 2014:	44 percent
Limits on Content (0-35)	15	16	Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:	No
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	21	22	Political/Social Content Blocked:	Yes
TOTAL* (0-100)	48	50	Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:	Yes
			Press Freedom 2015 Status:	Not Free

* 0=most free, 100=least free

Key Developments: June 2014 – May 2015

- The Media Commission continued to block news websites that were operating without a government license as required by the amendments to the Press and Publications Law passed in September 2012. Charges were also pressed against websites operating without a license (see **Blocking and Filtering**).
- Two licensed news websites, *Al-Kawn News* and *Saraya News*, were blocked in December 2014 and January 2015, respectively, for publishing content related to the Jordanian pilot Moath Al-Kasasbeh who fell captive in the hands of Islamic State fighters (see **Blocking and Filtering**).
- On January 28, 2015, two staff at *Saraya News* were detained for 40 days and charged by the State Security Court prosecutor under the amended antiterrorism law (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities**).
- Zaki Bani Irshaid, deputy leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, was arrested in November 2014 and charged with “harming Jordan’s ties with a friendly state” for a post he published on his Facebook profile criticizing the UAE. On February 14, 2015 he was sentenced to 1.5 years in prison. Two other activists affiliated with the Brotherhood were detained for Facebook comments (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities**).
- On March 11, 2015, the military attorney general asked the prime minister to lift parliamentary immunity from Member of Parliament Tarek Khoury in order to put him on trial for “inciting to undermine the regime.” He had posted comments critical of Jordan’s relationship with Israel on his Facebook page (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities**).

Introduction

Internet freedom conditions in Jordan declined over the past year. In April 2014, amendments to the antiterrorism law were passed, broadening the definition of terrorism to include acts that “could threaten the country’s relations to foreign states or expose the country or its citizens to retaliatory acts on them or their money,” an offense that had already been listed in the penal code,¹ which defines terrorism as “any act that can lead to undermining the political regime of the Kingdom.”² The new law also explicitly penalizes the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to promote, support, or fund terrorist acts. In November 2014, the new antiterrorism amendments were used to sentence the deputy leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Zaki Bani Irshaid, to 1.5 years of prison with hard labor for “threatening the country’s relation to a foreign state” after he criticized the government of the United Arab Emirates on his personal Facebook page.³ A number of other activists were arrested and put on trial by the State Security Court for material they published online.

In September 2014, Jordan joined the U.S.-led coalition performing airstrikes against Islamic State (IS) targets in Syria. Opposition groups protested the move using the slogan and hashtag, “Not Our War.” However, after the Jordanian pilot Moath Al-Kasasbeh was taken captive and eventually killed by IS, these expressions of opposition became much less visible. While some say that the killing of the pilot united Jordanians and strengthened sentiments in support of the war,⁴ others say dissenting voices decreased due to self-censorship.⁵ Meanwhile, government censorship of online content increased after Al-Kasasbeh was taken captive and eventually executed by IS. In December 2014, the State Security Court Prosecutor issued a decree prohibiting the publication of any news items or photos released by IS.⁶ Two websites, *Al-Kawn News* and *Saraya News*, were blocked for breaking this order. *Al-Kawn* was unblocked four days later, but *Saraya News* remained blocked for over a month, while its owner and editor were detained and charged under the antiterrorism law.

Internet access was first provided to Jordanians in 1995, the same year the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC) was established to regulate the country’s information and communication technology (ICT) sector.⁷ Recognizing the economic potential of the internet, authorities actively promoted ICT development in the small kingdom.⁸ Once seen as a means for trivial entertainment and the exchange of scandalous or banned information, the internet has grown into a vital instrument for business and an important forum for public discussion. Accordingly, as the number of users began to increase dramatically, the government drew up legal methods for maintaining control over online content and monitoring users, particularly after the regional uprisings of 2011.⁹ Constitutional amendments were passed to calm public discontent, improving protections on freedom of expression and strengthening the independence of the judiciary, while parliamentary elections took place

1 Anti-Terrorism law –No 18, art. 3 (B), 2014. <http://bit.ly/1trDOKp>.

2 Penal Code of Jordan, art. 149, <http://bit.ly/1h4UPfa>.

3 Human Rights Watch, “Jordan: 18 Months for Criticizing UAE,” February 19, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1VN1Sjt>.

4 Alice Su, “It Wasn’t Their War,” *The Atlantic*, February 5, 2015, <http://theatlantic.com/1Awioos>.

5 Ziad Abu-Rish, “Manufacturing Silence: On Jordan’s ISIS War, Arab Authoritarianism, and US Empire,” *Jadaliyya*, February 14, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1E144xh>

6 “A Ban on Publishing what ISIS Releases About Pilot,” [in Arabic] *Al-Ghad*, December 25, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1ELp5Qh>

7 The TRC was established as a financially and administratively independent jurisdictional body through the Telecommunications Law No. 13 of 1995 and a subsequent amendment Law No. 8 of 2002.

8 Privacy International, “Jordan,” *Silenced: An International Report on Censorship and Control of the Internet*, 2003, <http://bit.ly/1gyucy4>.

9 “Demonstrations, roads blocking and confrontations in Jordan after rise in Fuel prices,” [in Arabic] *Al Eqtisadiyah*, November 13, 2012, accessed June 26, 2013, http://www.aleqt.com/2012/11/13/article_709448.html.

under a slightly improved electoral framework in January 2013. Most of these however did not materialize into any change in the status quo.

In September 2012, the Press and Publications Law was amended to introduce more restrictions to online media, which was used to block nearly 300 websites in June 2013 for failing to register with the Media Commission. Although most of the sites eventually received licenses and were unblocked, the government continued to block unlicensed news websites over the coverage period. The Universal Periodic Review of Jordan, which took place in October 2013 under the United Nations Human Rights Council, criticized the increased censorship in the country, along with the continued trials of civilians before military courts for offenses related to free speech.¹⁰

Obstacles to Access

Mobile broadband has soared in the country, boosted by the introduction of 4G LTE and more affordable pricing. However, competition in the ICT sector is hindered by the influence of Jordan's existing providers.

Availability and Ease of Access

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a total of 44 percent of the Jordanian population had access to the internet by the end of 2014, up from 26 percent five years earlier.¹¹ National figures from the Telecommunications Regulation Commission (TRC) estimated the number of users to have increased by end of March 2015 to 76 percent, or 5.9 million users. According to TRC statistics, the number of mobile broadband subscriptions reached 1.5 million by end of March 2015, while fixed-line ADSL subscriptions numbered 218,459. Mobile phone use has also expanded rapidly, and by the end of March 2015, the number of subscriptions was over 11.5 million, representing a penetration rate of 147 percent.¹²

The expansion of fixed-line internet access has been hampered by the relatively high costs of computers and connectivity. Consequently, fixed broadband subscriptions have decreased since 2009, with only 2.83 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants.¹³ On the other hand, mobile broadband use has soared to over 1.5 million subscribers.¹⁴

For several years, internet connection fees were considered high relative to neighboring countries and the cost of living. Prices have dropped in 2014, but complaints about the quality of service persist. Monthly fixed-line subscription prices currently range from JOD 19.9 (US\$28) for speeds of 1 Mbps and an allowance of 10 Gigabytes (GB), to JOD 34.9 (US\$59) for speeds of up to 24 Mbps and unlimited download. Orange Jordan also began offering a fiber connection with speeds up to 80 Mbps and unlimited download allowance for JOD 74.9 per month (US\$105.5). Postpaid monthly

10 United Nations Human Rights: Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Universal Periodic Review: Media Brief," October 24, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1KWeI5i>; UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review*, January 6, 2014, 19, www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session25/Documents/A-HRC-25-9_en.doc.

11 International Telecommunication Union, "Percentage of individuals using the Internet," 2014, <http://bit.ly/1cblxxY>.

12 TRC, "Statistics for Q1, 2015," [in Arabic], <http://bit.ly/1UhTwru>.

13 International Telecommunication Union, "Fixed (Wired) Broadband Subscriptions," 2000-2013, accessed July 5, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1cblxxY>.

14 Mohammad Ghazal, "Internet penetration rises to 76 per cent in Q1," *The Jordan Times*, June 20, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1IrYb1y>

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plans for Evolved High-Speed Packet Access (HSPA+) range from JOD 10 (US\$14) to JOD 20 (US\$28) per month, depending on speeds and data allowances.¹⁵ By comparison, gross national income per capita is US\$4,950, or US\$413 per month.¹⁶ Meanwhile, internet access in many of the country's governorates and remote areas remains poor, as almost all companies concentrate their operations and promotions in major cities, particularly the capital Amman.

Restrictions on Connectivity

There were no restrictions on connectivity seen in Jordan over the past year. However, the centralization of internet backbone infrastructure in government hands remains a concern. The formerly state-owned Jordan Telecom controls the fixed-line network and provides access to all other ISPs, thereby centralizing most of the connection to the international internet. The government retains a degree of control over the country's internet backbone, and all traffic within the country must flow through a government-controlled telecommunications hub.

ICT Market

The ICT sector is regulated under Law No. 13 of 1995 and its amendment, Law No. 8 of 2002. The law endorses free-market policies and governs licensing and quality assurance.¹⁷ Citizens and businesses can obtain internet access through privately owned service providers without state approval or registration. A November 2011 reports listed 16 active internet service providers (ISPs) in Jordan, though licenses have been granted to over 20 companies.¹⁸ The market is dominated by Umniah (a subsidiary of Batelco Bahrain), Zain, and Jordan Telecom, in which France Telecom owns 51 percent of shares, with the remaining shares divided between the Social Security Corporation, the armed forces, and others.

3G services were first launched by Zain and Jordan Telecom (Orange) in mid-2010 and increased upon implementation of a tax exemption for the purchase of smartphones and the launch of mobile broadband by another provider, Umniah.¹⁹ A call from the TRC to introduce a fourth mobile operator in December 2012, however, was rejected by Zain and Jordan Telecom.²⁰ No new providers have been introduced since then and the three companies have a similar share of the market.²¹ After rejecting two international operators, the Jordanian government awarded Zain Jordan with the rights to introduce 4G services to the market. Zain launched its 4G/Long Term Evolution (LTE) services on February 14, 2014. In January 2015, Orange Jordan was awarded the second 4G license for US\$100

15 Zain, "Voice Plans & Benefits," 2015, <http://www.jo.zain.com/english/consumer/voice/Pages/default.aspx>.

16 World Bank Databank, "GNI per capita, Atlas method (current US\$)," 2009-2014, accessed September 15, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1Diy0Q>.

17 "Jordan," in *One Social Network With A Rebellious Message*, Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, 2009, <http://bit.ly/1V0uqvC>.

18 International Telecommunications Union, *ICT adoption and prospects in the Arab region*, Summit 2012, 57, <http://bit.ly/1Ku2sZC>.

19 International Telecommunication Union, "Smartphone tax exemption drives 3G growth (Jordan)," news release, January 19, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1JBLEtS>.

20 Ghazzal, Mohammad, "Orange Jordan Opposes TRC Plan," *The Jordan Times*, December 15, 2012, accessed April 30, 2013 <http://bit.ly/1ECBaO5>.

21 Mai Barakat, "Jordan will be challenging, but a fourth operator might find elbow room as a mobile broadband provider," *Ovum*, February 21, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1JBMhUg>.

million and launched LTE services in Amman in May 2015. It announced aims to expand the service nationwide by the third quarter of 2015.²²

Regulatory Bodies

The TRC is the independent agency responsible for regulating the ICT sector. It is governed by the Telecommunications Law and defined as a “financially and administratively independent juridical personality.”²³ Nonetheless, it is accountable to the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MoICT), which was created in April 2002 to drive the country’s ICT development.²⁴ The TRC’s Board of Commissioners and its chairman, currently Ghazi Salem Al-Jobor (appointed in June 2015),²⁵ are appointed by a resolution from the Council of Ministers based on a nomination from the prime minister.²⁶ Although one of the TRC’s responsibilities is to monitor quality of service, its reports rely on self-evaluation reports submitted by the ISPs themselves, in which, for example, Orange Jordan claims that 99.9 percent of complaints are solved within 10 days of receipt. In March 2015, French telecoms company Orange brought a case before the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes against Jordan for a lack of transparency in the procedure for renewing a 2G license.²⁷

Limits on Content

The blocking of news websites has increased since June 2013, when some 300 sites were blocked for failing to obtain a license with the government after a new Press and Publication Law was passed nine months earlier. Since then, most news sites have obtained licenses and had access restored. Over the past year, however, authorities have once again targeted online news outlets with blocking, this time for publishing content surrounding the Jordanian military and its campaign against ISIS.

Blocking and Filtering

On the eve of December 25, 2014, the Attorney General issued a decree prohibiting media outlets from publishing any news or images released by ISIS about Moath al-Kasasbeh, a Jordanian pilot held captive by the terrorist group.²⁸ One day later, the licensed website *Al-Kawn News* was blocked for disobeying the order and publishing news about the pilot’s captivity circulated by ISIS.²⁹ *Al-Kawn News* was unblocked four days later, on December 29, 2015, but the news item in question was removed.

On January 28, 2015, Jordanian authorities blocked the licensed local news website *Saraya News* after it published a report stating that an imprisoned Iraqi militant would be freed in a hostage nego-

22 Mohammad Ghazal, “Orange launches 4G in Amman, to expand nationwide by Q3,” *The Jordan Times*, May 26, 2015 <http://bit.ly/1eCivRh>

23 The Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Jordan, Chapter III, <http://bit.ly/1Mwi5QE>.

24 Information & Communication Technology Association-Jordan, “Jordan ICT Sector Profile,” Slide 10, accessed July 5, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1V0uKKZ>.

25 TRC, “Board of Commissioners Profile,” <http://bit.ly/1LD3DRd>.

26 TRC, Telecommunication Law No. (13) of 1995, January 10, 1995, pg 18, accessed June 26, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1KWfNtT>.

27 “Orange Sues Government Over 2G,” [in Arabic] *Al-Ghad*, March 22, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1Jl3Fjl>.

28 “Armed Forces Calls on Media to Stand with Nation: A Ban on Publishing Anything from ISIS on Pilot,” [in Arabic], *Al-Ghad*, December 25, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1ELp5Qh>.

29 Skeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, “Jordanian Media Commission Blocks Al-Kawn News,” January 2, 2015, <http://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/Jordan/4933>.

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tiation deal with IS.³⁰ The website was unavailable for 40 days, during which two staff were detained (see “Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities”).

Reacting to these events, Amjad Al-Qadi, the head of the Media Commission, sent a memo on April 6, 2015 to all owners and editors of licensed news websites instructing them not to publish any news or information related to the military without a “clear and direct request to the authorized military sources.” The request was delivered through an email sent to website owners and editors.³¹ By contrast, there were no reports that print and audiovisual media received any requests, most likely since they are known to be monitored by the authorities, and their employees do not dare to publish any unauthorized news about the military.

Under amendments to the Press and Publications Law (PPL) passed in 2012, news websites are required to obtain a license from the Media Commission or face blocking. The law also requires any electronic publication that publishes domestic or international news, press releases, or comments to register with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. One of the requirements for a general news website to obtain a license is to have an editor-in-chief who has been a member of the Jordan Press Association (JPA) for at least four years. The problematic situation eased in July 2014, when the JPA law was amended to enable journalists in online media to become members. Prior to that, journalists could only become members if they underwent a period of “training” in an “official” media organization. According to the Center to Defend Freedom of Journalists (CDFJ), around 500 journalists in Jordan are not members of the JPA.

For many observers, the law’s broad definition of a news website includes almost all Jordanian and international websites, blogs, portals, and social networks. According to the amended PPL, an electronic publication is defined as “[a]ny website with a specific web address on the internet which provides publishing services, including news, reports, investigations, articles, and comments, and chooses to be listed in a special register maintained at the Department, pursuant to instructions issued by the Minister for this purpose.”³² Articles 48 and 49 enable the head of the Media Commission to block any website for failing to obtain a license or, more broadly, for violating Jordanian law.

Consequently, 291 news websites were blocked in June 2013 on instructions from the head of the Media Commission (then-named the Press and Publications Department) after a nine-month grace period. Most have since applied for a license to get unblocked. By June 2014, there were 160 licensed general news sites and 100 specialized websites. To obtain licenses, most general news websites hired new chief editors who were already JPA members, a concerning development for independent media given that 64 percent of JPA members work in government or government-related media outlets.³³ Out of 160 licensed websites, 68 hired new editors-in-chief who have full time jobs at other media outlets, a violation of Article (23-A) of the PPL.³⁴ As of October 2014, 112 websites were blocked, but only 15 remained operational—the remaining had shut down.

Some unlicensed websites have resorted to using alternative domains in order to remain accessible in Jordan, such as *JordaniansVoice.net* and *7iber.com*. But in June 2014, the newly appointed head

30 Committee to Protect Journalists, “Jordan Arrests Two Journalists on Aiding Terrorism Charges,” January 29, 2015, <http://cpj.org/x/5ecf>.

31 The report author received a copy of the email.

32 Jordanian Media Monitor, Amended Press & Publications Law No. 32 of 2012, August 2013, <http://bit.ly/1zqh8ig>.

33 Sawsan Zaideh, “The Jordan Press Association: A Monopoly by Law”, *7iber*, February 16, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1zhSXSv>.

34 Sawsan Zaideh, “Licensing News Websites: Legal Restrictions and Structural Deformities,” *7iber*, November 3, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1bWgbba>.

of the Media Commission sent a request to the TRC to block the alternative domains, which in turn sent a decree to ISPs to implement the blocking. In addition, the head of the Media Commission pressed charges against *7iber* two months later for operating an unlicensed media organization in violation of Article 48(B) of the PPL. The case is currently in court, and *7iber* faces a potential fine of JOD 1,000-5,000 (US\$1,500–7,500).

The Jordanian government claimed that the amendments were introduced “to regulate the work of news websites and in order to increase transparency and accountability.” Officials stated that the law was called for by professionals within the industry, in order to preserve professionalism and protect the media from those “who have practiced embezzlement, defamation and blackmailing to a degree that threatened social peace.”³⁵ On the other hand, local journalists, international human rights groups,³⁶ and a former Jordanian minister of media affairs and communication criticized the decision as a serious affront to freedom of the press³⁷ and a decisive move to censor the internet in Jordan.³⁸

Content Removal

The 2012 amendments of the PPL increased the liability of intermediaries for content posted on their sites, placing readers’ comments under the same restrictions as normal news content. Clause 3 of Article 49 states that both the editors-in-chief and owners of online publications are legally responsible for all content posted to the site, including user comments.³⁹ Moreover, websites must keep a record of all comments for six months after initial publication and refrain from publishing any “untruthful” or “irrelevant” comments.⁴⁰ As a result, some news websites, such as JO24, stopped allowing comments altogether as an expression of protest.⁴¹

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

Many journalists and editors practice self-censorship and rarely cross the standard red lines, particularly concerning material that could be perceived as harmful to national security, national unity, the country’s economy, or the royal family. In a 2014 survey of journalists conducted by Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists in Jordan, 91 percent of Jordanian journalists admitted to practicing some form of self-censorship, with more than three-quarters indicating they avoid publishing any material critical of the military, the judicial system, tribal leaders, and religion.⁴²

In August 2014, after parliament voted to pass constitutional amendments proposed by the government that give the king sole authority to appoint heads of the military and the intelligence, major

35 UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review*, January 6, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1FIG39f>.

36 Article 19, “Jordan: Websites Blocking Order Must be Revoked Immediately,” June 6, 2013, accessed February 3, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1JQyooW>.

37 Amman Net “Udwan: Blocking the Websites is against the Democratic Empowerment,” *Jordan News Agency*, June 3, 2013, accessed February, 3 2014. <http://bit.ly/1xXFNhe>.

38 Reporters Without Borders, “International Free Expression Groups Call For An End To Internet Censorship In Jordan,” October 8, 2013, accessed February 3, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1KrbWyx>.

39 Jordanian Media Monitor, Amended Press & Publications Law No. 32 of 2012, August 2013, <http://bit.ly/1zqh8ig>.

40 Jordanian Media Monitor, Amended Press & Publications Law No. 32 of 2012, August 2013, <http://bit.ly/1zqh8ig>.

41 In a discussion about the impact of website licensing and the PPL, publisher of news website JO24 Basel Okour said that they stopped allowing comments on their website in protest of the law and to protect the privacy of their readers. See “An Open Meeting at 7iber to Discuss the State of Online Journalism After the Website Registration Requirement,” [in Arabic], YouTube video, 1:43:44, posted by Jordan Days, December 8, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjUkkuRcBII>.

42 “DPP Brings Down Media Freedom in Jordan,” *Al Araby Al-Jadeed*, May 3, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1Nd4opP>.

newspapers in Jordan did not publish any articles critical of the amendments, demonstrating the high degree of self-censorship in the traditional media. In one incident, prominent journalist and writer Rana Sabbagh wrote on her Facebook profile that her bi-weekly column in *Al-Ghad* newspaper was banned by the editor, and that she would publish the column on Facebook and in another media outlet.⁴³

The online information landscape was also limited by direct bans on reporting on certain topics. On April 6, 2015, the head of the Media Commission sent a memo to all news websites prohibiting them from publishing anything related to the military without direct approval from the Armed Forces. He wrote in the memo that “websites should refrain from publishing or broadcasting any articles or military information without getting this news or information from official sources in the Armed Forces.”⁴⁴ Months earlier, on November 26, 2015, the Armed Forces appointed for the first time an official spokesperson, following increased media coverage of Jordan’s participation in the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS.⁴⁵ However, this did not result in increased transparency from the Armed Forces, as the number of comments and statements made by this spokesperson regarding the war on ISIS was only four, and he did not make any statements regarding Jordan’s participation in the Saudi-led coalition against Yemen.⁴⁶

Social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are very popular, particularly among younger Jordanians. Facebook tops the list of most visited websites in Jordan, while YouTube comes in fourth.⁴⁷ There are around three million Facebook users in Jordan, representing close to half of the country’s population,⁴⁸ with a penetration rate of 48 percent of the population as of May 2014, of whom 59 percent are male.⁴⁹ Twitter has garnered a much smaller following of around 161,000 users, or around 2.4 percent of the population.⁵⁰ State officials, including the Royal Hashemite Court,⁵¹ the Queen, the Crown Prince,⁵² and Prince Hassan,⁵³ have established social media accounts to communicate with the public. Queen Rania is by far the most popular of these accounts, with nearly 4 million followers on Twitter and over 600,000 on Instagram.⁵⁴ She was, in fact, referred to by *Forbes* Middle East magazine as “The Queen of Social Media.”⁵⁵ Among government officials, Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh has over 71,000 Twitter followers, while an unverified account related to Prime Minister Abdulla Ensour has 5,000 followers.⁵⁶

43 Rana Sabbagh, Facebook post, August 20, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/rana.sabbagh.777/posts/10152655581815903?pnref=story>.

44 The researcher obtained a copy of the official memo.

45 “Colonel Mamdouh Al-Ameri Appointed Official Spokesperson of the Army”, *Al-Ghad*, November 26, 2014 <http://bit.ly/1Hlhzwv>.

46 Omar, Mohammad, “Media and Propaganda: The Triumph of Propaganda and the Demise of the Press,” *Tiber*, May 28, 2015 <http://bit.ly/1ezV8x9>.

47 Alexa, “Top Sites in Jordan,” accessed on May 14, 2015, <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/JO>.

48 Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, “Citizen Engagement and Public Services in the Arab World: The Potential of Social Media,” *Arab Social Media Report*, Issue 6, June 2014, <http://bit.ly/1lr6QKL>.

49 “Citizen Engagement and Public Services in the Arab World: The Potential of Social Media,” *Arab Social Media Report*.

50 “Citizen Engagement and Public Services in the Arab World: The Potential of Social Media,” *Arab Social Media Report*, Figure 32.

51 Royal Hashemite Court Instagram Page, <http://instagram.com/rhcjo>.

52 King Abdullah II Bin Al Hussein Instagram Page, <http://instagram.com/alhusseinbinabduallahii>.

53 Prince Majlis El Hassan Twitter Page, <https://twitter.com/majliselhasan>.

54 Queen Rania Al Abdullah Twitter Page, <https://twitter.com/QueenRania>; Queen Rania Al Abdullah Instagram, <http://bit.ly/1iVLx62>.

55 Abderrahim Etouil, “Queen of Social Media,” *Forbes Middle East*, July 1, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1KMPUv0>.

56 Prime Minister Dr. Abdulla Ensour Twitter Page, <https://twitter.com/DrEnsour>.

Digital Activism

In the past year, activists have used social media to advocate for social issues and push for legislative change. On May 2, 2015, activist Reem Al-Jazi wrote an op-ed to protest the fact that hospitals require the approval of the father or a male guardian before admitting a child, even for emergency procedures, and do not acknowledge the mother.⁵⁷ Her article went viral and sparked a social media campaign petitioning parliament to amend article 123 of the Civil Law that only grants guardianship to the father or the paternal grandfather or uncle.⁵⁸

Social media platforms, in addition to news websites, have played an important role in mobilizing public protests to oppose restrictions on free expression, to call for broader political reforms, and to protest government policies. Over 500 websites went offline on August 29, 2012 in a coordinated protest against the changes in the PPL.⁵⁹ The home pages of these sites displayed a black screen with text reading, "You may be deprived of the content of this site under the amendments of the Jordanian Press and Publications Law and the governmental internet censorship." Nonetheless, social media activism and numerous protests ultimately failed to halt passage of the bill in September 2012.

On the other hand, social media platforms were also utilized to mobilize for further restrictions on access to internet content by users. For instance, a Facebook campaign to press the government to block pornographic websites in the country has garnered more than 37,800 likes as of May 2014.⁶⁰ The government responded in 2013 by introducing a new telecommunications law that, if passed, would prohibit ISPs from allowing users to access pornographic websites.⁶¹ The ICT minister at the time, Dr. Azzam Slait, reportedly withdrew the proposed law, sending it back for further consideration and possible amendments in mid-2014.⁶² The law was also published on the Legislation and Opinion Bureau's website to solicit feedback from the public.⁶³

Violations of User Rights

A host of repressive laws and severe punishments create an environment of fear in Jordan, where journalists, political activists, and ordinary users face arrest and possible prosecution if they overstep the boundaries of acceptable speech. Since the passage of the amended antiterrorism law in 2014, a growing number of citizens have faced charges before the military-dominated State Security Court for their online activities, particularly on Facebook.⁶⁴ At the same time, strict penalties for criminal defamation against public authorities, both foreign and domestic, remain a prominent concern.

57 Reem Al Jazi, "Women: Full Responsibilities and Stolen Rights," [in Arabic] *Khaberni*, May 2, 2015 <http://bit.ly/1SVFrNV>.

58 Reem Al Jazi, "Petition my son's life is my responsibility," May 2015, <http://chn.ge/1SBn85R>.

59 Ruth Michaelson, "Jordan blocks over 200 'unlicensed' websites," Index on Censorship, June 3, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1kDEXC>.

60 Mohammad Ghazal, "Facebook campaign seeks 100,000 signatures to block porn sites," *The Jordan Times*, August 6, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1IN9P7c>.

61 "Government will block pornographic content from the internet in early 2014," [in Arabic] *Alarab Alyawm*, February 23, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1LD4Esz>.

62 Ibrahim Mbaideen, "Slait: The Government is Reconsidering the New Communication Law," [in Arabic] *Al Ghad*, June 24, 2014, <http://bit.ly/11SyOiy>.

63 Ibrahim Mbaideen, "The Proposed Telecommunication Law Prohibits Access to Pornographic Websites," [in Arabic] *Al Ghad*, April 7, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1vjlp6E>.

64 Reem Al-Masri, "Anti-Terrorism Law: Between Prosecuting Terrorist Ideology and Dissident Opinion," [in Arabic] *7iber*, July 27, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1fz0yJ0>.

Legal Environment

In September 2011, responding to public discontent, constitutional amendments were introduced to strengthen checks and balances and ensure greater protections for human rights.⁶⁵ The measures resulted in the creation of a constitutional court (Article 58-61), an explicit prohibition on torture (Article 8), and the restriction of the State Security Court's jurisdiction to crimes of treason, espionage, and terrorism (Article 110).⁶⁶ The Constitutional Court's nine members were named by King Abdullah II in October 2012.⁶⁷ Several constitutional amendments touched directly or indirectly on internet freedom. Specifically, terms such as "mass media" and "other means of communication," which likely encompass online media, were added to provisions that protect freedom of expression and concomitantly allow for its limitation during states of emergency (Article 15). With regard to the right to privacy, judicial approval was added as a precondition for censorship or confiscation of private communications (Article 18).⁶⁸ Despite the passage of an Access to Information Law in 2007, a number of restrictions remain on requesting sensitive social and religious content.⁶⁹

Beyond these constitutional protections, several laws that hinder freedom of expression and access to information remain on the books. These include the 1959 Contempt of Court Law, the 1960 penal code, the 1971 Protection of State Secrets and Classified Documents Law, the 1992 Defense Law, the 1998 Jordan Press Association Law, and the 1999 Press and Publications Law. Defamation remains a criminal offense under the penal code. Amendments to the press law enacted in 2010 abolished prison sentences for libeling private citizens. However, the same bill increased fines and jail sentences for defaming government officials to up to JOD 10,000 (US\$14,000) and 3 to 12 months imprisonment.⁷⁰

The 2010 cybercrime law prescribes penalties for hacking and online identity theft, though it also contains several provisions that could be easily used to suppress online expression. For example, the law prohibits posting any information concerning national security, foreign affairs, the national economy, and public safety that is not already available to the general public. Nevertheless, following protests by civil society, several more egregious provisions related to defamation and warrantless police searches were removed by royal decree in September 2010, one month after the law was passed.⁷¹

The Press and Publication Law, amended in 2012, bans the publication of "material that is inconsistent with the principles of freedom, national obligation, human rights, and Arab-Islamic values."⁷² Article 38 of the PPL also prohibits any "contempt, slander, or defamation of or abuse of" religions or

65 The Law Library of Congress, "Jordan: Constitutional Law Court Newly Established in Jordan," news release, December 3, 2012, accessed June 26, 2013, <http://1.usa.gov/1V0VPTH>.

66 "Jordan's King Abdullah Approves Constitutional Reforms," *Haaretz*, September 20, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1Xm9Fyo>.

67 Agence France Presse, "Jordan's King Abdulla Sets up a Constitutional Court," *The Daily Star*, October 7, 2012, accessed June 26, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1L7W0Sq>.

68 Constitution of Jordan, January 1, 1952, http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/constitution_jo.html.

69 For example, the law bars public requests for information involving religious, racial, ethnic, or gender discrimination (Article 10), and allows officials to withhold all types of classified information, a very broad category (Article 13) see, Arab Archives Institute, "Summary of the Study on Access to Information Law in Jordan," June 2005, <http://www.alarcheef.com/reports/englishFiles/accessToInformation.pdf>.

70 Jordan Media Strengthening Program, *Introduction to News Media Law and Policy in Jordan*, May 2011, pg 38, <http://bit.ly/1F79kKt>.

71 Reporters Without Borders, "Government yields to protests, modifies cyber crimes law," International Freedom of Expression Exchange, news release, September 3, 2010, http://ifex.org/jordan/2010/09/03/cyber_crimes_law/.

72 The Press and Publications Law 1998 amended by Law No. 32.

prophets. The same article prohibits the publication of any material that is defamatory or slanderous of individuals who are also protected by the same law against “rumors” and “anything that hinders their personal freedom.”⁷³ Journalists, website owners, and editors in chief face a fine of JOD 5,000 (US\$7,500) if found to violate the law. In addition, civil defamation suits against private individuals can result in fines of between JOD 500 to 1,000 (US\$700 to 1,400).⁷⁴

In early 2014, a law was passed to limit the powers of the quasi-military State Security Court, before which citizens and journalists could be tried for crimes related to freedom of expression. The law, proposed in September 2013 in response to international criticism, limited the court’s jurisdiction to only five areas: terrorism, espionage, drug felonies, treason, and currency counterfeiting.⁷⁵ At the time, the changes were seen cosmetic at best, with Human Rights Watch stating that Jordan needed to “overhaul its outdated penal code and stop dragging civilians in front of the State Security Court just for demonstrating for reform.”⁷⁶

Worryingly, amendments to the 2006 antiterrorism law passed in mid-2014 essentially reversed many of the advances made in the above-mentioned law by expanding the definition of “terrorism” to include broader offenses.⁷⁷ Sanctioned by the senate on May 1, 2014⁷⁸ and endorsed by King Abdullah II the following month,⁷⁹ the amendments have been criticized for “broaden[ing] the definition of terrorism and threaten[ing] freedom of expression,”⁸⁰ while increasing the scale of punishments. In addition to more legitimate offenses such as attacking members of the royal court or provoking an “armed rebellion,” the definition of terrorist activities now includes any acts that “threaten the country’s relations to foreign states or expose the country or its citizens to retaliatory acts on them or their money,” an offense that had already been listed in the penal code.⁸¹ The new law also explicitly penalizes the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to promote, support, or fund terrorist acts, or to subject “Jordanians or their property to danger of hostile acts or acts of revenge.”⁸²

Political analysts understood the new amendments in the context of the security threats posed by Jordan’s proximity to Syria and growing tensions in the region.⁸³ However, many critics view the bill as a tool for the government to crackdown on the opposition and impose further restrictions on media freedom.⁸⁴ Online media outlets will be even more hesitant to publish any news or opinions that could be construed as overly-critical of foreign leaders or diplomats, particularly of foreign countries. The law comes at a time when neighboring countries, such as Egypt,⁸⁵ Saudi Arabia,⁸⁶ and the Unit-

73 Law number (32) 2012. Amendments to The Press and Publications law for the Year 1998 (8), Article 38, clauses A, B, C & D.

74 The Press and Publications Law 1998 amended by Law No. 32.

75 Human Rights Watch, “Jordan: End Trials of Persecutors Undermining Regime,” October 29, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1hEq94a>.

76 Human Rights Watch, “Jordan: End Trials of Persecutors Undermining Regime.”

77 Human Rights Watch “Jordan: Terrorism Amendments Threaten Rights,” May, 17, 2014, <http://bit.ly/Rhgpzz>.

78 “The Senate Approves of ‘Journalists’, ‘Water’, ‘Anti-Terrorism’ and ‘Military Court’ Laws,” [in Arabic] *All of Jo*, May 1, 2014, <http://www.allofjo.net/index.php?page=article&id=68585>.

79 “Royal Endorsement of Anti-Terrorism Law,” [in Arabic] *Gerasa News*, June 1, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1N5YSnh>.

80 Human Rights Watch, “Jordan: Terrorism Amendments Threaten Rights.”

81 Anti-Terrorism law –No 18 2014 Article 3 (b), <http://bit.ly/1trDOKp>.

82 Reporters Without Borders, “King urged to repeal draconian changes to anti-terrorism law,” June 16, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1UvoACc>.

83 “Jordan Amends Anti-Terror Law to Face Syria Fallout,” *Naharnet Newsdesk*, April 25, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1KufnuJ>.

84 Areej Abuqudairi, “Jordan Anti-Terrorism Law Sparks Concern,” *Al Jazeera*, April 25, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1OdOzw0>.

85 Shadia Nasralla, “Egypt designates Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist group,” *Reuters*, December 25, 2013, <http://reut.rs/1cRIG3C>.

86 Alaa Shahine and Glen Carey, “UAE Supports Saudi Arabia Against Qatar-Backed Brotherhood,” *Bloomberg Business*, March 9, 2014, <http://bloom.bg/1KMZu11>.

ed Arab Emirates,⁸⁷ have outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. The Islamic Action Front, the political arm of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood and a prominent opposition group, asked for changes to the law to be made in early 2014.⁸⁸

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Several journalists have been charged with criminal offenses despite provisions in the Press and Publication Law that ban the jailing of journalists for press offenses. On January 28, 2015, Jordanian authorities arrested *Saraya News* owner Hashem Al-Khalidi and editor Saif Obeidat after the news site published a report stating that an imprisoned Iraqi militant would be freed in a hostage negotiation deal with ISIS.⁸⁹ The two were charged by the State Security Court of using media to spread the ideas of a terrorist group and of placing Jordanians under threat of hostile acts in violation of articles (3) and (7) of the amended antiterrorism law. They were detained for 40 days before being released on bail, after which point the website was unblocked.

Political tensions have also resulted in the prosecution of Jordanians affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. In November 2014, the deputy leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, Zaki Bani Irshaid, was arrested and charged with "harming Jordan's ties with a friendly state" under the amended antiterrorism law after he published a post on his Facebook profile criticizing the UAE government and accusing it of sponsoring terrorism and supporting the "Zionist agenda."⁹⁰ He was repeatedly denied bail during the trial, and in February 2015 he was sentenced by the State Security Court to 1.5 years in prison with hard labor.⁹¹ The Court of Cessation upheld the ruling in April 2015.⁹²

In January 2015, two activists affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested on orders from the State Security Court because of material they published on Facebook. Thabet Assaf was arrested on January 15 and charged with "undermining the regime on social networking websites." He was released on bail on March 26.⁹³ Basem Rawabdeh was arrested on January 17 and charged with "inciting to oppose the regime through Facebook comments." He was sentenced to five months in prison and released in May 2015.⁹⁴

Even parliamentarians (MPs) have been targeted for their online posts. In March 2015, two citizens filed a complaint against MP Tarek Khoury at the State Security Court for a Facebook post in which he criticized Jordan's peace treaty and relationship with Israel.⁹⁵ Following the complaint, the State Security Court prosecutor sent a request to the prime minister requesting that parliamentary immunity be lifted from Khoury in order to put him on trial for charges of "undermining the regime"

87 "UAE jails 30 over 'Muslim Brotherhood ties,'" *BBC News*, January 21, 2014, <http://bbc.in/1N5ZR6X>.

88 Mousa Kraeen, "The Legal committee in the Islamic Action Front Requests Certain Amendments to the proposed Anti-Terrorism Law," [in Arabic] *AsSabeel*, March 23, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1y91uIG>.

89 Committee to Protect Journalists, "Jordan Arrests Two Journalists on Aiding Terrorism Charges," January 29, 2015, <http://cpj.org/x/5ecf>.

90 Rana F. Sweis, "Jordan Arrests Muslim Brotherhood Official Over Criticism of United Arab Emirates," November 21, 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1B3k9FC>.

91 "Muslim Brotherhood leader sentenced to 1.5 years in jail," *The Jordan Times*, February 15, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1EbfNMS>.

92 "Cessation Court Overturns Bani Irshaid's Appeal of State Security Court Ruling," [in Arabic] *Al-Ghad*, April 15, 2015 <http://bit.ly/1Fk7y6l>

93 Al-Masri, "Anti-Terrorism Law: Between Prosecuting Terrorist Ideology and Dissident Opinion."

94 Al-Masri, "Anti-Terrorism Law: Between Prosecuting Terrorist Ideology and Dissident Opinion."

95 The researcher obtained a copy of the military prosecutor's letter to the Prime Minister.

and “using the internet for acts not sanctioned by the state that can harm the Kingdom’s ties with a foreign country” under articles (3-B) and (7-C) of the antiterrorism law. The two citizens who filed the complaint eventually withdrew it, but many viewed the move as a message intended to deter people from expressing their views freely on Facebook.

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Since the passage of amendments to the antiterrorism law in 2014, a number of people have been arrested and put on trial at the State Security Court for private messages they posted on WhatsApp. While there is no concrete evidence that the government systematically monitors and intercepts private communications, defense lawyers say that material obtained from mobile phones or laptops is often obtained without a court order, which cannot be legally used as evidence.⁹⁶ In October 2013, Ayman al-Bahrawi was accused of “lengthening the tongue” and “insulting” foreign heads of state in private WhatsApp messages found on his mobile phone.

In general, Jordanians are careful when talking on mobile phones or at public meetings. This attitude has passed naturally to the internet, where it is believed that security services closely monitor online comments, cataloging them by date, internet-protocol (IP) address, and location. Furthermore, clauses within mobile phone contracts give Jordanian companies the right to terminate services should customers use it in any way “threatening to public moral or national security.”⁹⁷

Cybercafes, where users might otherwise write with relative anonymity, have been subjected to a growing set of regulations in recent years. Since mid-2010, operators have been obliged to install security cameras to monitor customers, who must supply personal identification information before they use the internet. Cafe owners are required to retain the browsing history of users for at least six months.⁹⁸ Authorities claim these restrictions are necessary for security reasons. Although enforcement is somewhat lax, the once-thriving cybercafe business is now in decline due in part to the restrictions, as well as increased access to personal internet connections.

Intimidation and Violence

There were no reported instances of physical violence against internet users for their online activities over the past year. A climate of fear and intimidation remains, however, for those working in online media. The last reported incident occurred on July 17, 2012, when unknown perpetrators raided the offices of the online news site *Watan*, stealing documents and damaging equipment.⁹⁹

Technical Attacks

Over the past year, incidents of cyberattacks against bloggers and staff of online news websites de-

96 Al-Masri, “Anti-Terrorism Law: Between Prosecuting Terrorist Ideology and Dissident Opinion.”

97 Eye on Media, “Declining Freedom, Restrictions on the Internet and a Financial Crisis,” December 25, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1KN2GcQ>.

98 International Freedom of Expression Exchange, “Cyber crime law attacks free expression; Internet cafés monitored,” news release, August 18, 2010, http://www.ifex.org/jordan/2010/08/18/cyber_cafe/; “Interior requires internet cafes to install surveillance cameras and keep internet visits for months” [in Arabic], *Saraya News*, June 3, 2010, <http://www.sarayanews.com/object-article/view/id/23211>.

99 “Report: increasing attacks on journalists in Jordan, mostly from the security,” [in Arabic] *Satel News*, July 8, 2012, <http://bit.ly/15WAUGB>.

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creased in severity compared to previous years. In 2012, the webpages of the news sites *Khaberni* and *Al Ain* were hacked; the site of the Jordanian rap group Ahat was also hacked on September 15, 2012.¹⁰⁰ In February 2011, one of the country's most popular news websites, *Ammon News*, was hacked and temporarily disabled after its editors refused to comply with security agents' demands to remove a statement by 36 prominent Jordanian tribesmen, in which they called for democratic and economic reforms. Among other actions, the hackers deleted the joint statement, which were politically sensitive given the groups' historic support for the monarchy.¹⁰¹

100 Skeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, *Press and Cultural Freedom in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine – Annual Report 2012, 2013*, <http://foundationforfuture.org/en/Portals/0/Grantees%20Publications/SKeyes%202012%20Annual%20Report%20EN.pdf>.

101 Committee to Protect Journalists, "In Jordan, website hacked after running sensitive statement," February 9, 2011, <http://cpj.org/x/416b>.