



# 2006 Annual Report

## MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

## NO IMPROVEMENT IN PRESS FREEDOM AMID WARS AND DICTATORSHIPS

The freedom and safety of journalists in the region were under heavy siege in 2005 as violence increased with the war in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The authoritarian regimes in most countries have little respect for basic freedoms and crack down harshly on the media with repressive laws. Heads of state, ministers, security agents and police targeted the media and its representatives throughout the year.

Their excuses were states of emergency (Syria and Egypt), the "fight against terrorism" (Morocco and Saudi Arabia) and "the Islamic threat" (Tunisia). Attacks, threats and imprisonment of journalists are routine in this mixed bag of countries stretching from Algeria to Iran. During the year, 104 media workers were attacked or threatened, up from 73 the previous year. In Iran, prison often means torture as well. In Algeria, just a cartoon can land its author in jail. In Saudi Arabia and Yemen, taboo subjects such as corruption, Islamism and religion can also lead to prison for those who write about them.

Self-censorship or exile is often the only solution for Arab journalists. Most countries still have state monopolies of radio and TV and two-thirds of the 120 satellite TV stations broadcasting in the region are officially subject to government monitoring.

## THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS REGION FOR JOURNALISTS

The Middle East and North Africa was, with 27 journalists killed there in 2005, the world's deadliest region for the media. The lawlessness in Iraq was the main reason and 24 of the 63 journalists killed around the world died there. Most were killed trying to report on the activities of the Iraqi guerrillas and the chaos in the country, but terrorists sometimes broke into journalists' houses and killed them in front of their families. US soldiers were also responsible for killing 12 journalists and six Iraqi journalists were arrested by US troops on suspicion of helping the insurgents and detained for many months for no legal reason. They were not allowed lawyers or visits from their families or employers.

Foreign journalists, who are more easily identifiable, remain the chief targets of kidnappers, and seven were seized during the year. Florence Aubenas, of the French daily *Libération*, and her Iraqi guide Hussein Hanoun were held for more than five months before being freed. Fred Nérac, a French cameraman for the British TV network *ITN*, has been missing in Iraq since March 2003.

For the first time since the end of Lebanon's civil war in 1990, two outspoken journalists were killed there – Samir Kassir, of the Arab daily *An-Nahar* and the French station *TV5*, and Gebran Tueni, an MP and managing editor of *An-Nahar*, who were killed by car-bombs. They had taken anti-Syrian stands and were victims of the very volatile situation since the 14 February 2005 murder of former prime minister Rafik Hariri. May Chidiac, star presenter of the TV station *LBC*, was also targeted for assassination and seriously wounded.

Lebanese journalists, who enjoy freedoms almost unheard of in the Arab world, now fear for their lives. Some, whose names are on a blacklist, have fled abroad pending the definitive report of the United Nations enquiry into the Hariri murder, expected in June this year.

A journalist was kidnapped and tortured to death in Libya in mysterious circumstances and the authorities have refused to comment.

## CENSORSHIP EVERYWHERE

The governments of Libya, Iran, Syria, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia have total control over news within their borders and are among the world's most repressive regimes. All are ruled by men who deeply distrust the independent media and freely crack down on dissenting voices.

Iran is still the region's biggest prison for journalists. At the end of the year, five were in jail there, including the best-known, Akbar Ganji. Pressure by the international community and human rights organisations have often called for his release, in vain. The accession of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency on 3 August did not make things easier and the last quarter of the year was especially repressive, with at least 32 newspapers suspended.

The police state of Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who keeps an iron grip on publicly and privately-owned media, exerts wholesale repression. Journalists who deviate from the official line face an array of harsh laws as well as personal and bureaucratic harassment and police brutality. Hamadi Jebali, editor of the weekly *Al Fajr*, has been in prison since 1991 for libel and “belonging to an illegal organisation.”

Press freedom is also under attack in Algeria and Morocco, whose governments keep constant pressure on critical journalists and whose independent newspapers have a very precarious freedom. The situation worsened in Algeria in 2005 with more than 100 cases of press offences before the courts. The former managing editor of the daily *Le Matin*, Mohamed Benchicou, remained in prison with more than 50 lawsuits against him either completed or under way. He is also in poor health.

Libel prosecutions soared in Morocco. Journalists are fairly free there, but the lines set by the royal family must not be crossed and discussing such things as Western Sahara or goings-on in the palace are still punishable by imprisonment. Two journalists, Anas Tadili and Abderrahman el-Badraoui, were in jail at the end of the year. In a rare move, journalist Ali Lmrabet was banned from working as a journalist for 10 years.

Attacks on journalists increased in Egypt and Yemen, with more than 50 foreign and local media workers hounded, attacked or beaten during Egypt's November parliamentary elections. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has still not kept his oft-repeated promise to decriminalise press offences. The Yemeni national constitution guarantees press freedom but the authorities shut down newspapers and arrested and prosecuted journalists. Opposition journalist Nabil Sabaie was stabbed by armed men in Sanaa on 12 November. Libel suits are routinely used to crack down on those who dare to criticise the government or report on forbidden topics such as corruption, Islam or the judiciary.

The record was mixed in Israel, which greatly respects press freedom within its borders but not always in the Palestinian territories it occupies. Lawlessness and impunity in the Gaza Strip, controlled by the Palestinian Authority, helped gangs to kidnap four foreign journalists.

Lynn Tehini  
Head of Middle East and North Africa desk

## ALGERIA

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Press freedom declined further in 2005, with a record 114 prosecutions of journalists resulting in 111 fines or prison sentences, some suspended. Few cases were dismissed and some are still going on.

Newspapers were always sued for supposed libel and have been hounded since President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's re-election in April 2004, with censorship, repeated police summonses, government prosecutions and biased judges that often oblige journalists to censor themselves. But a few stub-

born journalists battle on, accumulating huge fines and prison sentences while remaining outspoken. Mohamed Benchicou, managing editor of the daily *Le Matin*, was still in prison at the beginning of 2006 despite his worsening health. He has been convicted of (or is being prosecuted for) nearly 50 press offences at the behest of the president, who has not forgiven him and the paper for campaigning against his re-election and writing a book called "Bouteflika, an Algerian sham" on the eve of the election.

## EGYPT

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President Hosni Mubarak yielded to opposition and US pressure to make reforms and said on 26 February 2005 he had asked parliament to amend the national constitution to allow the first presidential elections by universal suffrage, with candidates from other parties. Since he came to power in 1981 and declared a state of emergency, parliament (dominated by the ruling National Democratic Party, NDP) has chosen a single candidate.

Despite a boycott call by the opposition party Kefaya, which accused Mubarak of being biased, the amendment was made and approved by referendum in May on a 53% turnout. The first election under the new rules, on 7 September, saw Mubarak re-elected against a dozen other candidates.

Mubarak then failed to keep his promises, made in 2004, to amend the 1996 press law and decriminalise press offences. To the contrary, three journalists of the independent daily *Al-Masry Al Youm*, Alaa el-Ghatrifi, Youssef el-Aoumy and Abdel Nasser el-

Zouheiry, were each sentenced on 17 April to a year in prison and fined 1,340 euros for libel. They have appealed.

The regime was also responsible for violence against journalists throughout the year. On the day of the 25 May constitutional referendum, NDP activists and state security agents attacked a large number of women, including 10 Egyptian and three foreign journalists, ripping the clothes of some and groping and humiliating them. Some had to be hospitalised.

Such violence increased during the parliamentary elections held between 9 November and 7 December. More than 50 journalists for local and foreign media, including *Al Jazeera*, *Associated Press*, *the BBC*, *Los Angeles Times*, *CNBC*, *Al-Arabiya*, *Reuters*, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, *Al-Masry Al Youm*, *AFP*, *El Karameh*, *Al Fajr*, were harassed and jostled.

Self-censorship is also a problem in the country's media and religion, the legal system and the person of the president are taboo topics.

## IRAN

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The country remains the Middle East's biggest prison for journalists and bloggers, with 13 jailed during 2005. Five were still being held at the start of 2006. Threats, interrogation, summonses, arrests and arbitrary detention are sharply increasing. Journalists can often only stay out of prison by paying very high bail. The accession to power of hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has not improved the situation.

Journalist Akbar Ganji was held in solitary confinement during the year at Teheran's Evin prison despite his failing health. He now weighs only about 50 kgs as a result of a two-month hunger-strike he

began in July. Growing pressure by the international community for his release has still not had any effect.

Other journalists were released but remained under close surveillance. They included Taghi Rahmani, Reza Alijani and Hoda Saber, who were freed in June after two years. Their trials are still in progress however and they can be returned to jail at any time. The regime also uses bans on leaving the country as a weapon against journalists, notably Issa Saharkize, Ali Mazroui and Emadoldin Baghi, who was not allowed to go to France to receive a prize from the official French National Human Rights Commission on 12 December.

## IRAQ

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For the third year running, Iraq was the world's most dangerous country for the media in 2005. A total of 74 journalists and media assistants have been killed since the start of fighting in March 2003, making it the deadliest conflict for them since World War II. The US army also arbitrarily and illegally arrested journalists. Four were held at Camp Bucca, near Basra, in difficult conditions with no access to lawyers or the right to be visited by their families or employers. US forces have still not presented any evidence they were involved in illegal activities.

More journalists were kidnapped during the year, including seven foreign ones (who were more visible). French reporter Florence Aubenas and her interpreter Hussein Hanoun were freed on 12 June after 157 days and tough negotiations. Giuliana Sgrena, of the Italian daily *Il Manifesto*, was released on 4 March after a month. Three Romanian journalists – Marie-Jeanne Ion, Sorin Dumitru Miscoci and Eduard Ovidiu Ohanesian – kidnapped on 28 March, were freed after 55 days. French cameraman Fred Nérac, who vanished near Basra on 22 March 2003, has still not been found. The body of his Lebanese interpreter, Hussein Osman, was identified in June 2004 from DNA tests by British military police.

However 95% of the media workers killed in 2005 were Iraqis. Terrorist and guerrilla attacks (accounting for 65% of those killed in 2004)

became targeted in 2005. Gunmen broke into media workers' homes and killed them in front of their families, as was the case with Adnan Al Bayati, interpreter and producer for several Italian media outlets, who was murdered in Baghdad on 23 July. A presenter for the state regional TV network *Iraqiya*, Raeda Mohammed Wageh Wazzan, was found dead on 25 February, five days after being kidnapped by masked men.

US soldiers also shot dead three media workers, but military investigations either found no fault or were not yet complete. The army said on 26 April that US troops were not responsible for killing Italian security agent Nicola Calipari and wounding Italian journalist Giuliana Sgrena as she was being freed in March, saying that the rules had been obeyed and that the Italians' convoy had been warned before troops opened fire on it as it went to the airport.

Ahmed Wael al Bakri, an Iraqi producer for the TV station *Al Sharqiya*, was shot dead in his car as he drove too close to a US convoy in Baghdad on 28 June. US soldiers fired on a *Reuters* news agency team covering the death of two Iraqi policemen in Baghdad's Hay al-Adil neighbourhood on 28 August, hitting soundman Waleed Khaled, in the face and chest and slightly wounding cameraman Haider Kadhem. The US army admitted responsibility more than a week later but said the soldiers had acted "appropriately."

## ISRAEL

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The Israeli media were once again in 2005 the only ones in the region that had genuine freedom to speak out. But the government did not allow such freedom in the Palestinian territories it occupies. Israeli soldiers discriminated against Arab journalists and abuses against them, whether they worked for local media or pan-Arab TV stations such as *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya*, increased during the year. The Israeli army hounded, threatened, summoned and arrested them, sometimes without subsequent trial.

Awad Rajoub, a Palestinian journalist with *Al-Jazeera's* website, was arrested on 30 November and was still being held at the start of 2006. The army said his arrest at home in Doura had nothing to do with him being a journalist. A dozen journalists, nearly all Israeli Arabs, were summoned and interrogated about their work and political views

by the Israeli intelligence service, Shabak, which suspected them of having links with the Lebanese Hezbollah movement.

Nabil al-Mazzawi, an *Al-Jazeera* cameraman on the West Bank, was beaten on 4 November by Israeli soldiers and held for several hours after he filmed a demonstration against the wall separating Israel and the Occupied Territories. Majdi al-Arabid, cameraman for the Israeli TV stations *Channel 10*, was wounded in the stomach and the leg by gunfire as he filmed Israeli troops entering Beit Hanoun, north of Gaza.

French journalist Houda Ibrahim, of the radio station RMC Moyen-Orient, who had been sent by the French government to train Palestinian journalists, was refused entry to the West Bank from Jordan on 3 July.

## LEBANON

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2005 was a sombre year for the media in Lebanon, which has long had the best record for press freedom in the Arab world, and the country's journalists paid a very heavy price for the uncertainty and lawlessness since the 14 February assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri. Samir Kassir, columnist with the Arab daily *An-Nahar* and local correspondent for the French TV station *TV5*, was killed by a car-bomb on 2 June and Gebran Tueni, an MP and

managing editor of the paper, was killed by another on 12 December. May Chidiac, star presenter of the TV station *LBC*, was also targeted for assassination by a bomb placed under the seat of her car and was seriously wounded and mutilated. Lebanese journalists remain under pressure and live in fear, some of them fleeing abroad, as they await the definitive report of the United Nations enquiry into the Hariri murder, expected in June 2006.

## LIBYA

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Press freedom does not exist in the country of the “Brother Leader” Muammar Gaddafi. The media is totally controlled by the regime. Even the official daily, *Al-Zhafa al-Akhdar*, has been suspended several times for printing articles that displeased the regime. Journalist Daif al-Ghazal, 32, was tortured to death on 21 May 2005 in mysterious circumstances. The authorities promised to investigate but said nothing more. Ghazal had posted articles on the London-based opposition website [libya-alyoum.com](http://libya-alyoum.com) (“Libya Today”) strongly criticising the government and its Movement of

Revolutionary Committees (MRC).

Two journalists were in prison at the start of 2006 – Abdel Razak al-Mansouri, serving an 18-month sentence for posting criticism of the government online, and Abdullah Ali al-Sanussi, who has been held longer than any other journalist in the world (since 1973 without being charged or tried). His state of health and place of detention are not known. Despite Gaddafi’s new attitude to Western countries, which led to economic sanctions being lifted against Libya in 2004, civil liberties continue to be totally ignored.

## MOROCCO

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The government had made encouraging gestures towards press freedom in 2004 but this did not last into 2005, when two journalists were thrown in prison for supposed libel. One of them, Anas Tadili, editor of the weekly *Akhbar Al Ousboue*, was still in jail at the start of 2006 and a dozen other complaints against him were being considered. The other, Abderrahman el-Badrawi, former editor of the weekly *Al-Moulahid Assiyassi*, was pardoned by the king on 15 December, after three and a half years in prison in harsh conditions.

Other methods were used by the regime to silence dissenting voices. The weeklies *Al Hayat al Maghribia* ("Moroccan Life") and *Asharq* ("The East") were suspended for three months in January 2005. However, Moroccan journalists can work fairly freely as long as they do not cross the lines traced out by the monarchy, which bar discussion of the Western Sahara issue, anything to do with the king and various rackets involving senior government officials.

Ali Lmrabet was banned from working as a journalist for 10 years and fined 50,000 dirhams (€4,500) by the Rabat appeals court on 23 June for writing about Saharans in Tindouf. He has been

constantly hounded and followed by the secret police. Hassan Rashidi, head of *Al-Jazeera's* office in Rabat, was threatened with death after the station put out a report from him about student protests in Western Sahara, where working conditions for both Moroccan and foreign journalists are very difficult. A dozen journalists were physically attacked, arrested or expelled from the region in 2005.

The weekly *Al Jarida Al Oukhra* was officially warned by foreign ministry protocol chief Abdelhak el-Mrini after a 6 April report in the paper about the daily activities of the king's wife, Princess Lalla Salma. Managing editor Nureddin Miftah and journalist Maria Moukrim, both of the weekly *Al Ayam*, were summoned by the royal prosecutor after they ran a report about the royal harem. The paper *Tel Quel* was fined a total of 1,960,000 dirhams (€180,000) by a Casablanca court in two libel cases. An appeal court on 29 December reduced the fine in the first case to 800,000 dirhams (€72,000). Managing editor Ahmed Benchemsi and news editor Karim Boukhari were also given two-month suspended prison sentences.

## PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

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Violence against journalists increased in 2005 in the Palestinian territories, with threats, physical attacks and kidnappings. The lawlessness and impunity, especially in the Gaza Strip, included kidnappings of foreigners, some of them journalists, by local gangs often aiming to weaken the authorities.

Mohammed Ouathi, a soundman for the French TV station *France 3*, was kidnapped in Gaza on 14 August and freed nine days later. Lorenzo Cremonesi, of the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*,

was kidnapped on 10 September for several hours then released.

Reporter Dion Nissenbaum and photographer Adam Pletts, both of the US *Knight Ridder News Service*, were kidnapped by armed men on 12 October in Khan Younes, in the southern Gaza Strip, and freed a few hours later.

The kidnappings were not seriously investigated by the authorities, who also took no steps to prevent their recurrence and see such crimes were punished.

## SAUDI ARABIA

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The country is one of the world's harshest towards press freedom, with hardline religious elements and the fight against terrorism holding back political reforms. King Fahd died on 1 August 2005, but his successor Prince Abdallah, long the de facto ruler because of Fahd's ill-health, has not continued minor political reforms he himself had begun in 2004.

The media is tightly controlled by the Al-Saud family and the Higher Media Council, chaired by interior minister Prince Nayef, keeps a grip on all

news. Some daily papers are foreign-owned but can only be set up by royal decree and their managers must be approved by the government.

The four TV stations are run by the culture and information ministry. Saudis prefer watching satellite stations, however, and more and more homes have dish-receivers though these are officially forbidden. The pan-Arab satellite TV station *Al-Jazeera* has been banned since 2003 and foreign journalists are rarely granted visas to enter the country.

## SYRIA

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The country still has no free and independent media and Syrians have no other source of news but the state-run media that recycles official propaganda. President Bashar el-Assad, even more isolated internationally since the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005, continues to tightly control all news.

All newspapers are read before publication by the censorship office run by intelligence officials of the

ruling Baath Party. Foreign journalists are spied on and rarely get accreditation. The pan-Arab satellite TV station *Al-Jazeera* has still not been allowed to open a bureau in Damascus.

Syria is one of the worst offenders against Internet freedom and censors opposition and independent news websites, barring access to those that deal with Syrian policy, monitors online activity to silence dissident voices, and jailing Internet users and bloggers.

## TUNISIA

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The United States prematurely welcomed announced the government's press freedom measures in 2005 and France talked of its supposed respect for civil liberties, but the regime of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali kept an iron grip on state and privately-owned media and continued a wide-ranging crackdown on journalists with the help of a 130,000-strong police force.

The authorities, who hosted the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society in Tunis from 16 to 18 November, also hit out at human rights activists and opposition supporters.

The national journalists' union, SJT (with more than 150-members), was forbidden on 7 September to hold its founding congress. Yet the national constitution and the 1966 labour law gua-

rantee freedom to form trade unions. The labour law does not say unions must have prior approval of the government. They just have to notify the authorities and provide a copy of their statutes, which the SJT had already done, in vain.

Two journalists were still in prison in 2005. Hamadi Jebali, former editor of the weekly *Al Fajr*, has been in jail since 1991 for libel and "belonging to an illegal organisation." Lawyer Mohammed Abbou was sentenced to 18 months in prison on 28 April for writing an article on an Internet website. Woman journalist and human rights activist Sihem Bensedrine, editor of the online magazine *Kalima*, was targeted by an obscene press campaign. Several pro-government dailies, including *Al-Chourouk*, *Al-Hadith* and *As-Sarih*, used sexual imagery to accuse her of selling her soul.

# UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE)

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The UAE constitution guarantees press freedom, but the content and political line of newspapers, especially Arab-language ones, is closely monitored. English-language media have more leeway. A 1988 law states topics that cannot be

mentioned and journalists censor themselves in matters of domestic policy, the life of the ruling families, religion or relations with neighbouring countries. The foreign press is censored before it goes on sale.

## YEMEN

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Press freedom did not improve in 2005. Two opposition newspapers were fined and suspended for supposed libel and four journalists were banned from working from between six months and a year. Many other journalists were arrested, physically attacked or threatened for investigating corruption or sensitive matters involving President Ali Abdallah Saleh or his associates.

Freelance Nabil Sabaie was attacked and stabbed by armed men in a main street of the capital in broad daylight. Khaled el Hammadi, correspondent for the London-based paper *Al-Quds el Arabi*, was beaten by

soldiers and held for more than 30 hours after he investigated the crash of several military planes. Jamal Amer, editor of the independent weekly *Al-Wassat*, was kidnapped and beaten by armed men driving a vehicle belonging to the presidential guard.

The national journalists' union several times voiced concern about these attacks on press freedom. Its secretary-general, Hafez el-Bukari, resigned on 27 November in protest against the government and political parties he said were trying to marginalise the union.