

ALL STORMS AT A TIME

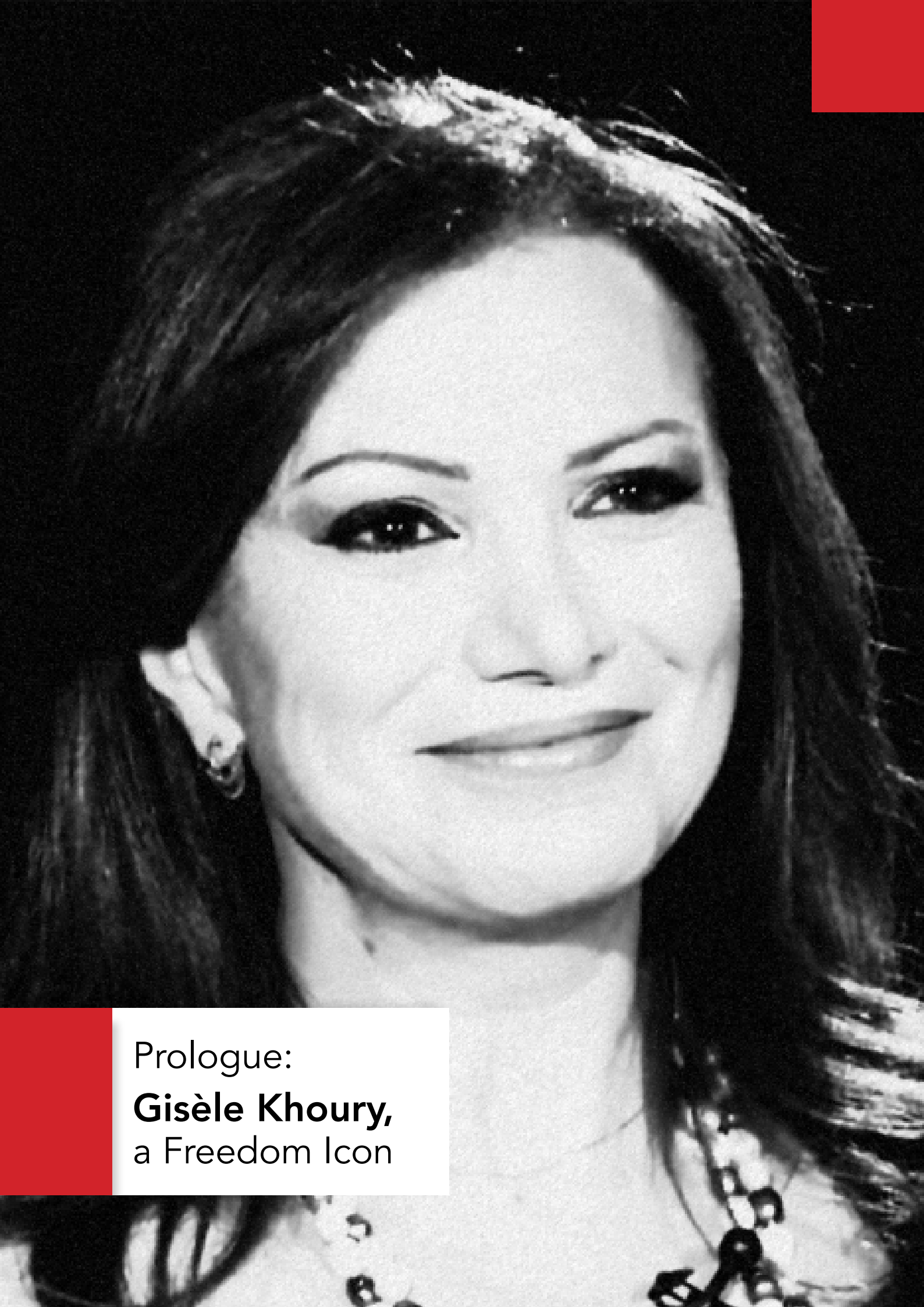
Annual Report 2023



THE SAMIR KASSIR FOUNDATION

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Prologue:
Gisèle Khoury,
a Freedom Icon

On October 15, 2023, the Samir Kassir Foundation lost its founder and president, Gisèle Khoury, but freedom won an icon.

Every member of the Foundation knows that Gisèle did not build everything just to see it destroyed by her farewell. She did not create an institution whose banner was freedom, only for it to be paralyzed by her physical departure.

She once said: "Culture and freedom are not a luxury. Culture and freedom are vital needs."

Gisèle Khoury charted the roadmap for the Samir Kassir Foundation when she posed the questions: "Who fears freedom? Really, who fears just a word? An opinion? A movie? An article? Or even a song? And most importantly, why do they fear it?"

She answered: "The tyrant, because it shakes his throne and threatens his authority. The criminal, because the truth condemns him. Religious institutions, whose words have lost their ability to persuade. The weak, who lives under the illusion of strength. When surrounded by these forces, should we remain silent?"

This thought never occurred to Gisèle. She always refused to remain silent. She did not stay silent after the assassination of her husband, Samir Kassir, in 2005. Instead, she expressed her opinion through the foundation that bears his name.

She did not want to create a foundation similar to many others, dedicated to commemorating people who have passed through our lives, but rather an foundation that draws its strength from the values that Samir Kassir embodied in his struggle against intimidation, threats, and compromises – a struggle for freedom and the renewal of critical thinking in the Arab world. A struggle that cost him his life. A struggle to invent the Arab tomorrow.

"A tomorrow that will free the word and end the causes of fear. A tomorrow where prisons will not hold anyone because of an idea or a standpoint. Where children do not perish in seas that swallow the most beautiful dreams, and women have freedom of body, thought, and decision. A tomorrow that will not sacrifice its youth to genocidal wars and dark movements, and where love will break all sieges and repair what decades of corruption have destroyed."

Today, more than ever, the Samir Kassir Foundation is building the tomorrow that Gisèle outlined. We build it every day, armed with her smile and clarity of vision.

Gisèle Khoury sketched an icon for freedom, Samir Kassir, but she did not realize that the icon was only a mirror of her face.

Introduction: The Erosion of Norms



With a massacre of journalists, that's how 2023 concluded! What a horrifying farewell the year bid us. What began as just another year of diminishing hope and rising hate and authoritarianism in the Levant culminated in the genocide of an indigenous people, the serial killing of journalists, and a circus show in media ethics and international humanitarian law. It also ended with the frustrating realization that international diplomacy proved futile, leaving us with an overwhelming urge to question everything we had tirelessly and relentlessly defended and stood up for. These were extremely testing times! Yet, amid all the discouragement, we emerged reassured of our commitment to human rights and democracy as the inevitable pathways for human development, prosperity, peace, and justice.

But 2023 did not commence on October 7. When examining free speech, democracy, pluralism, and political violence, 2023 presented challenges on every level. The global questions surrounding technological surveillance, the consolidated rise of authoritarian governance, the explicit targeting of journalists in warzones and conflicts, and the instrumentalization of hate speech in targeting vulnerable communities suggest that we are witnessing a climax in the distortion of human liberties and plural society.

As we step into 2024, several major countries across North America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East are undergoing elections. However, the rising wave of populism is driving a broader public to question basic rights, freedoms, and democratic norms. The combination of increasingly influential populist politicians and an economically and socially disenfranchised and skeptical population is undermining the universal rights agenda.

These challenges manifest across the Middle East. The Israeli state-terror machine has turned Palestine into a graveyard for the men and women who dared to uphold the fundamental premise of journalism – reporting the truth. Since October 7, 2023, over 100 journalists have been targeted and killed by Israeli attacks on the Gaza strip and Southern Lebanon, aiming to silence any reporting of the grave human rights violations committed by the Israeli army.

In Lebanon, the political process and the presidential election have been paralyzed by sectarian elites and militias obstructing basic democratic norms. Simultaneously, planned demonstrations calling for free speech and basic rights are demonized under the pretext of protecting “traditional values.” Additionally, fears of a full-scale war with Israel and the overall deterioration of the security situation have encouraged communities to revive civil war-time isolationist and despotic practices, which have consistently been precursors to spikes in violence towards marginalized groups, particularly refugees, migrant workers, and the LGBTQ community.

This situation is exacerbated by the weaponizing of hate speech and disinformation, increasingly integral elements in the political toolkit of Lebanon's reigning political parties. From Hezbollah's “off-the-shelf” accusations of treason to religious authorities' scaremongering against queer people in the name of “protecting family values,” the path toward a pluralistic society that appreciates diversity and individuality is riddled with challenges. Israel's aggression against journalists and civilians in South Lebanon has further fueled a toxic national conversation, where solidarity, resistance, sovereignty, and protection are all lost in translation.

Despite these challenges, the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) remains committed to enforcing Samir Kassir's generation-defining statement, “Despair is not [our] destiny.” The Foundation applies this learning process to its projects and overall theory of change by: (1) equipping independent media outlets and journalists with the means to ensure their safety, consolidate their financial sustainability, and improve their coverage, (2) illuminating alternative perspectives

on political discourse and the information ecosystem, (3) and establishing a historical lens on the state of media freedom to enable current and future practitioners to form a comprehensive picture of the changing contexts and realities of the sector. Against this disinformation-driven war on democracy and human rights, SKF stands at the frontline, fostering an environment conducive to free and professional journalism that is well-equipped to combat manipulation, hate speech, and authoritarianism.

SKF International Partners in 2023

In alphabetical order:



- A Culture of Safety (ACOS) Alliance



Canada

- Canadian Embassy in Lebanon



- Agency for Equality (AE)



- Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD)



- Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media (7amleh)



- CFI – French Media Cooperation Agency



- Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ)



- Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)



- BBC Media Action



- Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands

- Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs



- Free Press Unlimited (FPU)

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

- The Elephant in the Room (EITR)



- French Development Agency (AFD)



- Equal Rights and Independent Media (ERIM)



- Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF)



- Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism (EBI)



- Friends of Europe (FoE)



- European Services Network (ESN)



- Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD)



- European Union (EU)



- Global Media Registry (GMR)



- Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)



- Information Systems Security Association (ISSA) France



- Marie Colvin Journalists' Network (MCJN)



- International Center for Journalists (ICFJ)



- Media Diversity Institute (MDI)



- International Media Support (IMS)



- Meta



- International Media Support Group (IMSG)



- National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI)



- Internews



- New America – Ranking Digital Rights (RDR)



- James W. Foley Legacy Foundation (JFLF)



- Open Society Foundations (OSF)



- Journalisme et Citoyenneté (J&C)



- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)



•Pact



•United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF)



•Porticus



•United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)



•Reporters Without Borders (RSF)



•United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)



•Rory Peck Trust (RPT)



•United States Department of State – Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL)

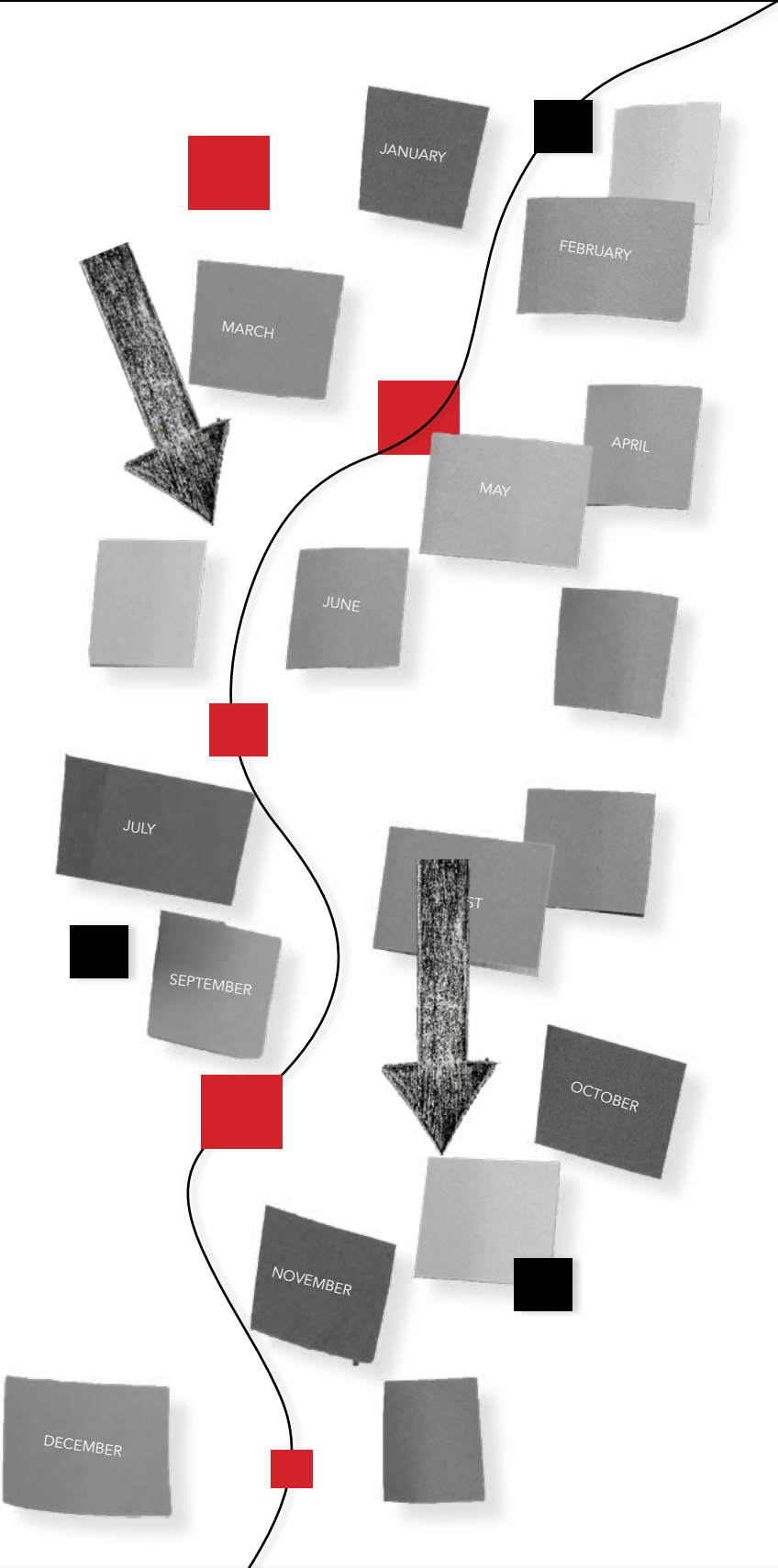
SIGRID RAUSING TRUST

•Sigrid Rausing Trust (SRT)



•Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF)

Key Milestones of the Year





January 3

SKF publishes a report titled "[Lebanon's 2022 Parliamentary Election: A Look into Political Parties' Online Behavior Vis-à-vis Alternative Candidates](#)" by InflueAnswers' Ralph Baydoun and Yara Al Chehayed in partnership with FNF, as part of the Inclusive Media, Cohesive Society (IMeCS) program.



January 4

SKF publishes the findings of a survey around "[Lebanese Citizens, Disinformation, and News Sharing Behavior](#)" conducted by Information International, with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

January 18

SKF, Maharat Foundation, GFMD, and UNESCO co-host a coordination meeting around Lebanon's media development priorities gathering representatives of donors, international implementers, independent media organizations, and the Lebanese government.



January 23

SKF publishes a breakthrough report titled "[International Aid to Lebanon's Security and Justice Sectors](#)" by Osama Gharizi with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

January 24

SKF takes part in the regional conference titled "Civic Space in the Arab Region" organized in Beirut by the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND).

February 2



SKF Executive Director Ayman Mhanna speaks about "Strategies for Media Sustainability" at a workshop with Jordanian media professionals organized by EBI in Amman, Jordan.

February 4

SKF and EBI co-host a workshop in Beirut around media accountability with Lebanese students, followed by the launch of a study on the use of WhatsApp by Lebanese youth to receive and share news, conducted by InflowAnswers' Ralph Baydoun with the support of FNF, as part of the IMeCS program.

February 23-25



SKF's Ayman Mhanna takes part in a conference titled "Connecting Media Communities in the Age of Disinformation" organized in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, by the European Union External Action Service.

February 24 – March 4

SKF, in partnership with ACOS Alliance, GCHR, Maharat Foundation, and MCJN, organizes two consecutive Hostile Environment and First Aid Training (HEFAT) for journalists in Naas - Metn, delivered by IMSG, with the support of UNDEF and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

March 2

SKF and MDI organize a training for university students on Fighting Online Hate Speech in Lebanon as part of the IMeCS program.

March 6

SKF's Ayman Mhanna speaks on gender equality and journalism at a panel organized by the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) titled "Gender Equality and Technology" at the Lebanese American University (LAU).

March 7

SKF Program Manager Wael Akiki takes part in a conference on "Journalism in Distress: Training and Protecting Information Guardians" organized in Beirut by the Association of Francophone Journalists and the Francophone University Agency.

March 19



SKF's Wael Akiki joins a panel titled "Why are Media Viability and Media Accountability Connected?" at the "Best Practices and New Mechanisms of Media Accountability in the MENA Region" conference organized by EBI in Tunis, Tunisia.



March 20

SKF and MDI organize a training for university students on Fighting Online Hate Speech in Lebanon, followed by the launch of the SKF report titled "[730 Days of Hate: Two-Year Monitoring of Hate Speech in the Lebanese Media and Social Media](#)" by Widad Jarbouh, Jad Safwan, and Jad Hani, as part of the IMeCS program.

March 24

SKF joins the “Truth Matters” Conference organized by the Lokman Slim Foundation at the American University of Beirut (AUB).

March 28-31



SKF takes part in the 16th “Assises internationales du journalisme” held in Tours, France and organized by J&C. The “Snake News” manga published in partnership with ISSA France and with the support of the European Union is shortlisted as a finalist for the CFI Media and Information Literacy Award 2023.

March 29-30



SKF takes part in the “Media Viability in Crisis” conference organized by GFMD at the Summit for Democracy in the Hague, the Netherlands.

March 30



SKF and ERIM hold a board meeting for the Agency for Equality in Paris, France.



April 6

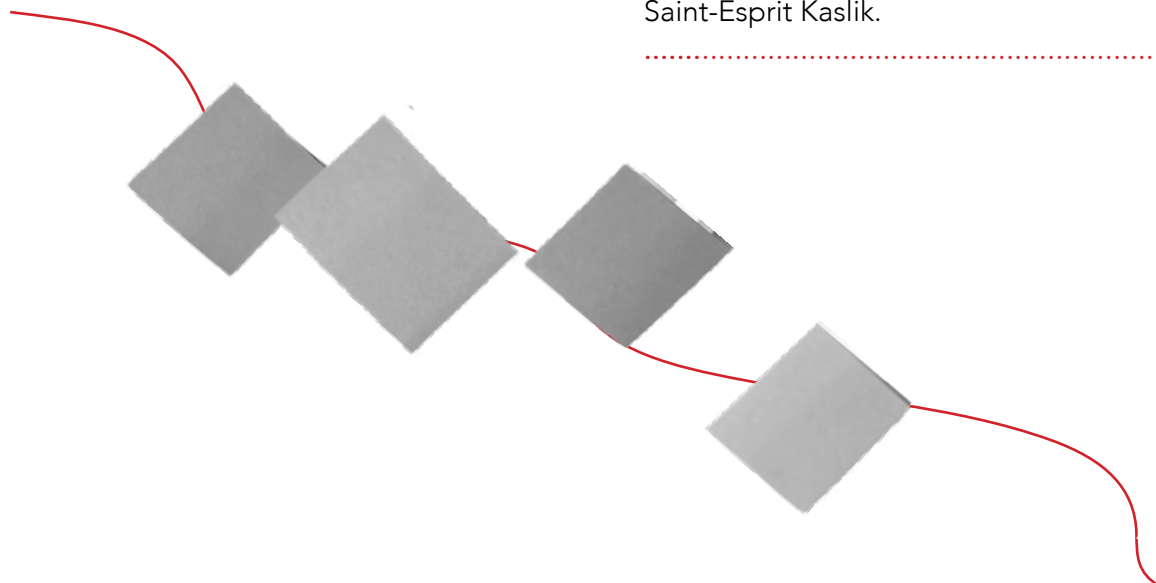
SKF publishes a report titled “[Lebanon's Information Environment: Exploring Appropriate Responses](#)” by Mirna Ghanem in partnership with NDI.

April 13

SKF hosts a hybrid workshop on media business models and financial sustainability for Lebanese and Palestinian media outlets involved in its AFD-CFI-supported Media Incubator project.

April 13

SKF's Ayman Mhanna and columnist Nadim Shehadi debate “What Lebanon Has Learned from its Civil War” at Université Saint-Esprit Kaslik.





April 17

SKF launches its 2022 Annual Report titled "[Hope Amid Anguish](#)" compiled by Program Manager Samer Abdallah.



April 27

SKF publishes a report titled "[Photojournalists' Social and Economic Rights in Lebanon](#)" by Nadine Moubarak with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in cooperation with SEEDS for Legal Initiatives.



April 25

SKF publishes the findings of a survey around "[Human Rights and Freedom of Expression in Lebanon: Identifying Allies and Opponents](#)" conducted by IPSOS with the support of UNDEF.

April 28

SKF and the Carnegie Middle East Center host a Chatham House round table to discuss the findings of SKF's report "International Aid to Lebanon's Security and Justice Sectors" by Osama Gharizi, with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

May 1

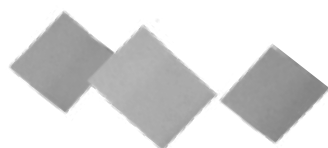


SKF's Ayman Mhanna attends GFMD's steering committee meeting in New York, USA.

May 2



SKF attends World Press Freedom celebrations at the United Nations Headquarters in New York.



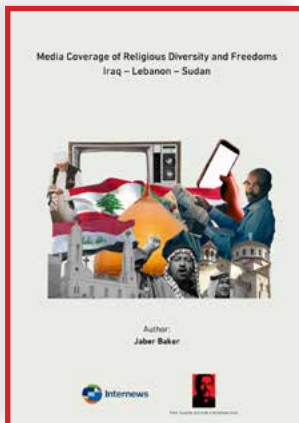
May 3



SKF's Ayman Mhanna and Deutsche Welle Akademie's Laura Moore facilitate an international debate on "Radical Approaches to Saving Journalism" in partnership with the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) and GFMD in New York.

May 5

The Middle East Institute hosts a Chatham House round table around SKF's Ayman Mhanna at its headquarters in Washington, D.C., USA.



May 8

SKF publishes a report titled "[Media Coverage of Religious Diversity and Freedoms: Iraq - Lebanon - Sudan](#)" by Jaber Bakr as part of the Internews-backed "Enhancing Quality Information on Religious Freedoms" (ENQUIRE) program.

May 12

SKF and other Lebanese civil society organizations meet the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression at the UN's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) building in Beirut.

May 16

SKF joins a debate with Lebanese Members of Parliaments (MPs) around legislative priorities to support freedom of expression, organized by Adyan Foundation.

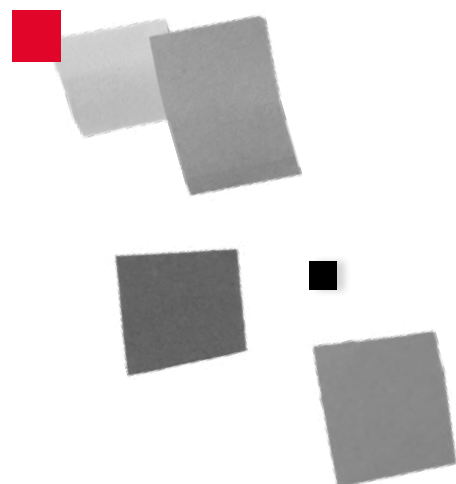


May 17

SKF publishes a report titled "[Challenges of Satire in Lebanon: The Price of Offense](#)" by Jad Safwan, in cooperation with Reputell and with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

May 18

SKF holds a round table around journalists' socio-economic rights in Lebanon to present and discuss the findings of its reports on the impact of the economic crisis on the sector.





May 30

SKF publishes a qualitative research report titled "[Mis- and Disinformation: Media Perception and Consumption of Fake News in Lebanon](#)" by Nidal Ayoub, with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

June 4-6



SKF organizes the 15th edition of the Beirut Spring Festival (BSF).

June 5



The European Union and SKF announce the winners of the 2023 Samir Kassir Award for Freedom of the Press during a special event held at Sursock Palace Gardens: Inas Hakya (Syria) winner of the Award for the opinion piece category and the Students' Prize, Mahmoud Elsobky (Egypt) winner of the Award for the investigative article category, and Mohamad Chreyteh (Lebanon), winner of the Award for the audiovisual news report category.

June 15-16

SKF and Internews co-host the ENQUIRE closing conference with journalists from Lebanon, Iraq, and Sudan.

June 20

SKF joins the "Civil and Political Rights in Lebanon, the Security Sector, and Community Policing" round table discussion organized by Alef-Act for Human Rights.



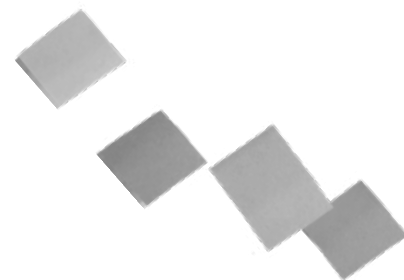
June 30

SKF publishes a report titled "[Unconventional Summons: Journalistic Immunity at Stake](#)" by Jad Safwan, in cooperation with Reputell and with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

July 5



SKF organizes the "Navigating Media Governance in the Digital Age: Can the Same Rules and Regulations Equally Apply to Traditional and Digital Media?" conference in partnership with RSF's Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI) targeting Palestinian and Jordanian media outlets in Amman.





July 5

SKF publishes a report titled "[Discord or Dialogue: Religious Authorities on Twitter](#)" by Jad Safwan, in cooperation with Reputell, as part of the Internews-backed ENQUIRE program.

July 7

SKF organizes the "Navigating Media Governance in the Digital Age: Can the Same Rules and Regulations Equally Apply to Traditional and Digital Media?" conference in partnership with RSF's JTI targeting Lebanese media outlets in Beirut.

July 7-8



SKF takes part in the "New Frontiers for Media Viability: Building an Inclusive Agenda" workshop at the International Association for Media and Communication Research conference in Lyon, France.



July 11



SKF and Friends of Europe co-host a Chatham House discussion around "[The EU and its Southern Neighbors: Normative Leadership or Realpolitik?](#)" in Brussels, Belgium, with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

July 11-13

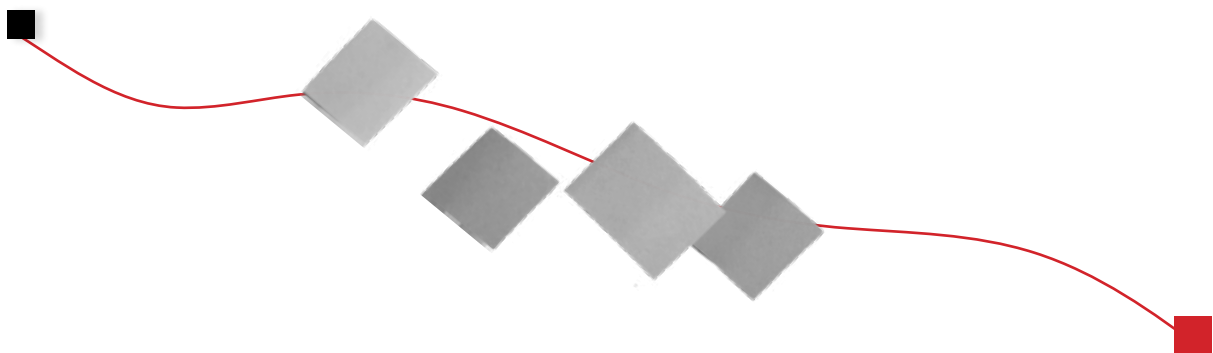


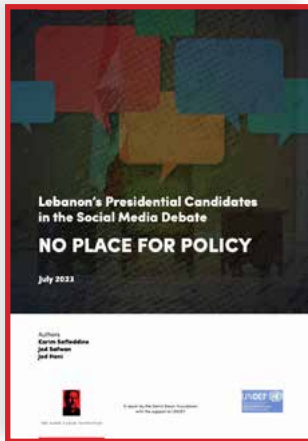
SKF joins the "Better Information for a Better Tomorrow" international conference hosted by CFI in Paris.

July 13-14



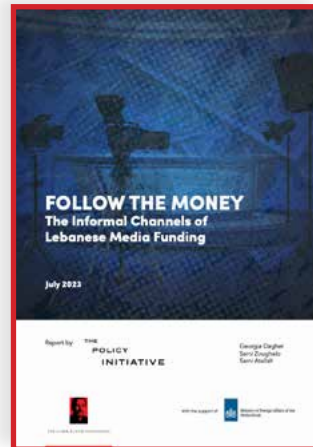
SKF Researcher Karim Safieddine attends the "Big Tech and Journalism - Building a Sustainable Future in the Global South" conference at the University of Pretoria, South Africa.





July 24

SKF publishes a report titled "[Lebanon's Presidential Candidates in the Social Media Debate](#)" by Karim Safieddine, Jad Safwan, and Jad Hani, with the support of UNDEF.



July 31

SKF publishes a report titled "[Follow the Money: The Informal Channels of Lebanese Media Funding](#)" by the Policy Initiative with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

July 27

SKF organizes a hybrid conference titled "Media Viability in Palestine" with the support of OECD.

August 3-4

SKF hosts a training workshop for university lecturers around the journalism safety curriculum developed in partnership with JLFL with the support of UNDEF.



July 27

SKF publishes a report titled "[Hate Speech in Lebanon: The Shortcomings and Responsibilities of Social Media Platforms](#)" by Afef Abrougui, Mirna Ghanem, and Farah Rasmi, in cooperation with MDI and New America's RDR, as part of the IMeCS program.



August 18

SKF publishes a report titled "[Silencing Lawyers: A Stand Against Censorship](#)" by Jad Safwan, in cooperation with Reputell and with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

September 5

SKF's Wael Akiki discusses "Enhancing Innovation and Incentives for the Media Sector to Keep up with Digital Change" at a seminar in Beirut organized by Maharat Foundation.

September 1-10



BSF Director Randa Asmar takes part in the Cairo International Festival for Contemporary and Experimental Theatre in Egypt.

September 11-12



SKF's Wael Akiki joins the "Sahafa Med Needs Assessment: What Recommendations for Funders and Media Development Stakeholders?" event in Amman, organized by J&C.



September 13

SKF publishes a report titled "[Dima Sadek and the Shrinking Space: As Large as a Prison Cell](#)" by Jad Safwan, in cooperation with Reputell and with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

September 22

SKF organizes a training workshop for independent Lebanese media outlets around Advertising and Marketing on Facebook and Instagram in partnership with Meta.



September 26

SKF publishes a report titled "[Journalists' Insurance Coverage in Lebanon](#)" by Nadine Moubarak, with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

October 4

SKF takes part in a panel titled "Freedom of Speech and the Information Ecosystem in Lebanon" organized in Beirut by Porticus.

October 4-6



SKF's Samer Abdallah joins the "Connecting Media Communities in the age of Disinformation" conference organized by the European Union External Action Service in Chişinău, Moldova.



October 7

SKF publishes a report titled "[WhatsApp 360: A Look into the WhatsApp News Ecosystem in Lebanon](#)" by InflowAnswers' Ralph Baydoun, in partnership with FNF, as part of the IMeCS program.

October 11-12



SKF Programs Coordinator Christelle El Hayek and Research and Program Officer Nadine Moubarak at the ACOS Alliance Annual Safety Coordination Meeting in New York.



October 13

SKF publishes a report titled "[Navigating Freedom: Making Sense of Lebanon's Digital Discourse on Free Expression](#)" by Jad Safwan, with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

October 17-21

SKF, in partnership with ACOS Alliance, GCHR, Maharat Foundation, and MCJN, organizes a Hostile Environment and First Aid Training (HEFAT) for journalists in Naas - Metn, delivered by IMSG, with the support of UNDEF and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

October 20-28



BSF Director Randa Asmar is a jury member at the Cairo International Gathering for University Theatre.

November 8-10



SKF Researcher Jad Hani takes part in the "Peaceful and Inclusive Elections in a Digital Age" Conference organized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Brussels.

November 17-19



SKF's Ayman Mhanna at the 2023 Halifax International Security Forum in Nova Scotia, Canada.

November 28

SKF joins a workshop hosted by FPU around the safety of Syrian journalists.

November 30

SKF's Ayman Mhanna addresses the European Commission and OECD's Joint Fundamental Rights and Civil Society Networks Seminar 2023.

November 30



SKF's Wael Akiki takes part in GFMD's MENA regional meeting in Amman to discuss the impact of the war on Gaza on the Palestinian media sector.

December 1-3

SKF's Wael Akiki joins ARIJ's 16th Annual Forum in Amman.

December 2-10

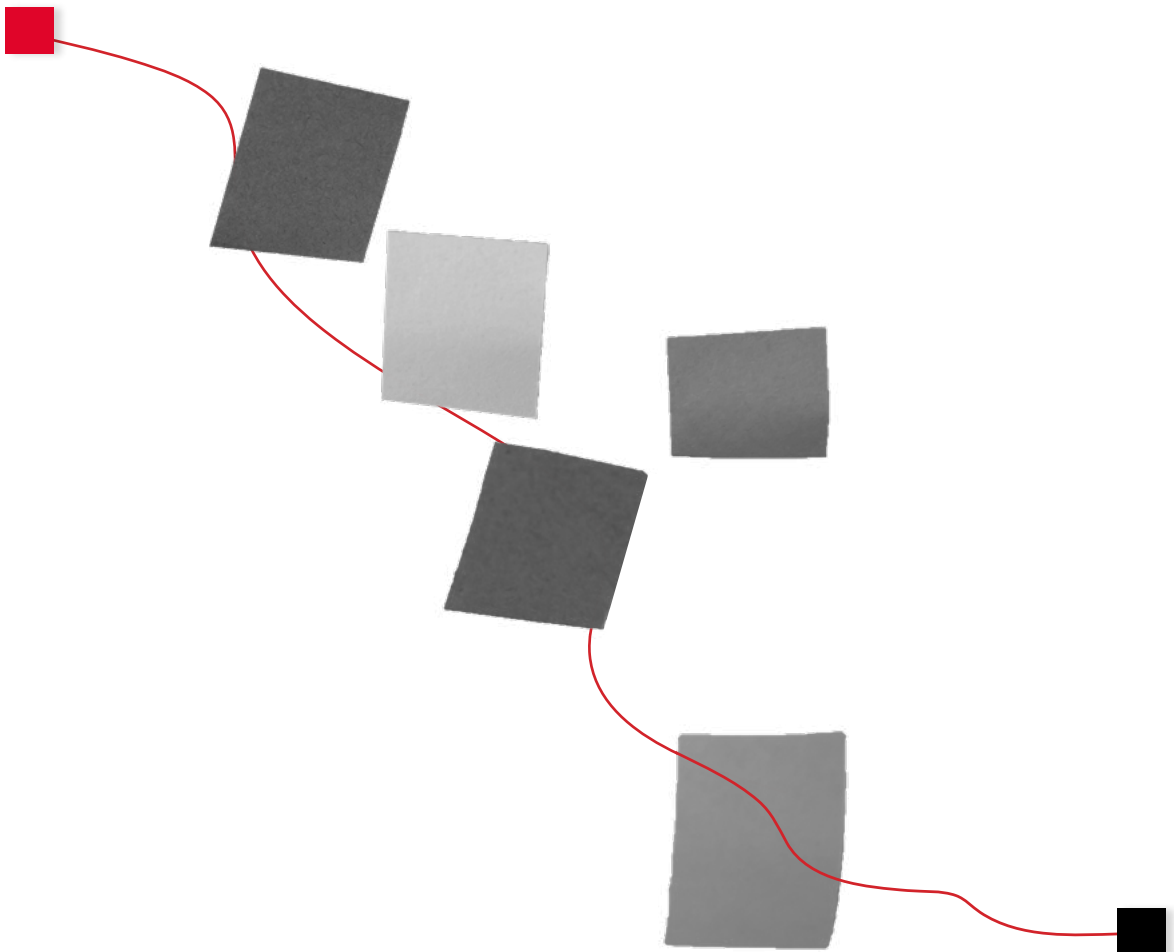


BSF Director Randa Asmar attends the Carthage Theatre Festival in Tunis.

December 7-8



SKF at AFD's conference on Human Rights-based Approaches for Development in Paris.



The Case for Freedom and Journalist Safety in the Levant

In 2023, SKF facilitated the training of 124 journalists through seven Hostile Environment and First Aid Training (HEFAT) courses held in Lebanon, all provided free of charge. Collaborating with other organizations such as ACOS Alliance, GCHR, Maharat Foundation, MCJN, and RPT enabled us to conduct multiple courses throughout the year.

Recognizing the multifaceted nature of journalists' safety, our comprehensive approach covers physical safety, digital safety, emotional well-being, and legal aid sessions. By addressing these aspects, we aimed to ensure that journalists are equipped not only with the skills to safeguard themselves physically during reporting but also with the necessary tools for overall preparedness. Neglecting any aspect of the toolkit, which includes mental and physical well-being, first aid proficiency, personal protective equipment, insurance coverage, emotional readiness, protection of their rights, and securing devices, leaves journalists exposed and inadequately shielded. In recognizing this holistic perspective, we emphasize the significance of a well-rounded approach to journalist safety, acknowledging the interconnected nature of the diverse challenges they encounter in the field, which we will detail in the following sections.

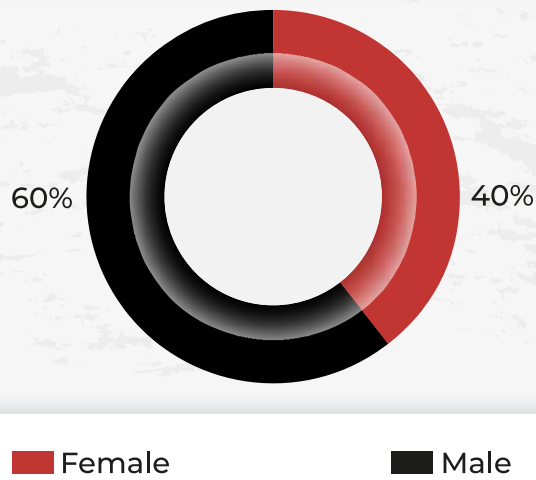




Lebanon

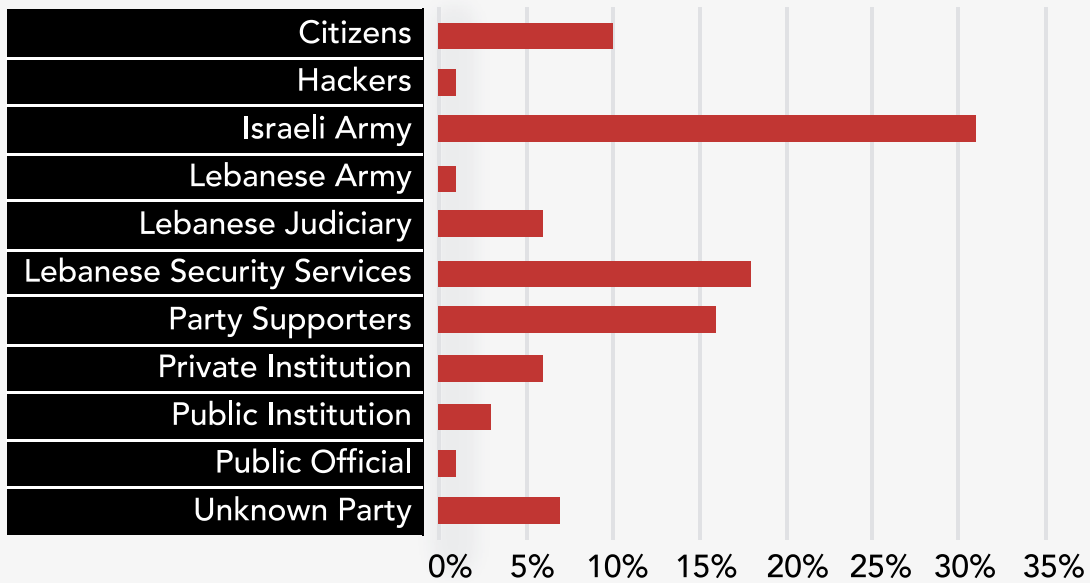
Violations	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Physical assault/ injuries				1	1	1	4	3	4	7	5	1	27
Threat	3			1		1			2	6	2		15
Summons	1		2	3	1	3		1	3				14
Legal action		6	1					1	1		1		10
Defamation and hate speech								1			5		6
Arbitrary dismissal			4										4
Detention									1	2		1	4
Damage to equipment	1										1	1	3
Job obstruction								3					3
Killing										1	2		3
Cultural censorship						1				1			2
Attack against property	1	1											2
Arrest					1								1
Fine												1	1
Hacking											1		1
Interrogation under pressure											1		1
Prison sentence							1						1
Targeting journalists' families											1		1
Travel/entry ban						1							1
Grand Total	6	7	7	5	3	7	5	9	11	17	19	4	100

Victims of Violations by Gender



Violations by Responsible Party

Attacker



Israeli War Crimes and Domestic Aggression

The spark of Israeli aggression extended from the Gaza Strip to Lebanon, as Hezbollah and its allies joined the conflict between Hamas and Israel following October 7. Border villages were almost entirely emptied of their residents following the military clashes; more than 76,000 people have been displaced from South Lebanon according to a report from the International Organization for Migration, a UN agency.

The deliberate targeting of journalists in Southern Lebanon by Israel has been confirmed through survivor testimonies, as well as photos and videos provided by various international institutions dedicated to safeguarding journalists, such as RSF and Human Rights Watch (HRW). Despite journalists' efforts to stay away from bombardment areas and their clear identification as members of the press, the Israeli army repeatedly targeted media crews. This resulted in the tragic deaths of Issam Abdallah, a Reuters visual journalist, and members of an Al-Mayadeen TV crew, including correspondent Farah Omar and cameraman Rabih Maamari. Additionally, several journalists sustained injuries, enduring both physical and psychological trauma.

This repeated targeting of journalists clearly indicates that Israel aimed to conceal the truth about the international law violations it was committing. This sparked a critical discussion on the preparedness of journalists in Lebanon and the region for reporting in conflict zones, highlighting the need for measures to enhance their readiness, including the provision of protective gear and specialized journalist safety training programs. SKF will continue to contribute to this effort through its journalist-focused HEFAT program, which it has been providing to journalists from Lebanon and the region for six years.

Targeting journalists at the scale witnessed since October 7, 2023, is a blatant violation of international law. If the mechanisms of international law fail to hold Israel accountable, journalism, as a fundamental vector of truth-seeking, is at risk. The implications of allowing Israel to act with impunity are terrifying, as forgiving the killing of journalists sets a dangerous precedent that could lead to the demise of journalism as we know it or aspire for it to be.

Demonization and Unjust Judicial Rulings

Domestically, a corrupt, failing state wielded its remaining authority against free and independent voices, demonizing the concept of freedom as a pretext for creating chaos. Marginalized communities were scapegoated to evade accountability for the country's unprecedented economic, financial, political, and health-related collapse, with justice being obstructed to maintain the status quo.

Alternative media faced repeated attacks for supporting marginalized groups, becoming a target for the mainstream political parties and affiliated groups who mobilized public opinion against the vulnerable. Refugees and the LGBTQ community bore the brunt the state and state-affiliated conservative zealots' aggression, with incidents such as clinics charges, sit-in disruptions, and physical assaults reflecting a contemporary manifestation of medieval times.

The Lebanese authorities mobilized the security agencies and the judiciary to suppress anti-government voices, particularly targeting independent media outlets that exposed numerous corruption cases in the country. Even traditional media, largely aligned with the ruling class, faced similar repressive tactics. This pervasive targeting of journalism underscores a systematic

crackdown on dissenting voices. These measures often hinge on conveniently vague charges such as defamation, slander, and fueling sectarian tensions, historically employed to silence opposition.

In an alarming case, the single criminal judge Rosine Hojeili sentenced journalist Dima Sadek to one year in prison on charges of defamation, slander, and inciting sectarian sentiments. This followed a lawsuit filed by the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), represented by its leader MP Gebran Bassil. Numerous other violations included summoning journalists to unqualified courts and police units. Examples include editor-in-chief of The Public Source Lara Bitar, co-founder of the Megaphone platform Jean Kassir, and journalist Mariam Majdoline Lahham. These cases exemplify the escalating authoritarianism and the state's anti-free press stance in Lebanon.

The dominance of sectarian divisions and political parties over trade and professional unions adds another layer to the organized, state-led effort to undermine basic freedoms. In March 2023, the Beirut Bar Association (BBA), in an arbitrary and unlawful procedure, amended its code of conduct to compel lawyers to seek prior permission from the BBA president before appearing on traditional or digital media. Thirteen lawyers unsuccessfully contested these amendments before the Court of Appeals in Beirut. This casts a bleak light on how bodies like the BBA and other syndicates – chief among which the Press Editors' Syndicate – are weaponized to complement the authorities' efforts to silence and restrict freedoms. It also exposes their complicity in safeguarding corruption and criminal activity, especially in major cases like the bank deposits crisis and the Beirut port explosion.

Individual and Public Freedoms at Risk

The Lebanese authorities have forsaken their prescribed role in reform and public administration, instead adopting a stance that undermines fundamental constitutional human rights and facilitates the involvement of non-state actors in the repression of liberties. In 2023, the LGBTQ community was particularly targeted and accused of "threatening spiritual and family values." This assault was spearheaded by political and religious forces, starting with inflammatory statements from Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and culminating in a proposed draft law criminalizing consensual same-sex relationships among adults. This draft suggests imprisonment of up to three years for anyone "promoting homosexuality," effectively demonizing those advocating for LGBTQ rights and more generally those defending basic human rights.

The year also saw a surge in violence targeting individuals within the LGBTQ community, as well as supportive journalists and activists. During a march organized by activists and civil society organizations titled the "Freedom March" in September, participants faced physical assault, intimidation, and threats. Although the march was transformed into a sit-in under threat, participants were not spared from attacks by a diverse mix of mobs from different religious denominations. Shockingly, security forces not only distanced themselves from the scene, but some even participated in the violence alongside the mobs and boasted about it on their social media accounts.

Minister of Culture Mohammad Mourtada assumed the role of a "moral policeman" over the city and the country, vigorously – yet, unsuccessfully – attempting to prevent the screening of the film "Barbie" under the pretext of deviancy. Simultaneously, he propagated sexist and homophobic positions. The same minister also showed little concern for Lebanon's historical

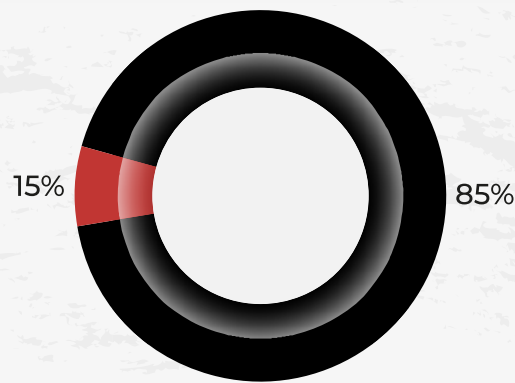
heritage. In a surprising move, after the October 7 conflict began, he ordered the removal of the blue shield emblem affixed to one of the walls of the Baalbek temple, violating an international agreement to protect cultural properties during armed conflicts.



Palestine

Violations	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Physical assault/injuries	27	49	14	16	34	24	21	17	31	33	26	38	330
Killing								1	1	56	35	63	156
Attack against property		1	2	2	1	1	2	18	3	20	27	39	116
Job obstruction	6	7	13	6	8	2	9	11	13	28	4	7	114
Arrest		3	2	7	4	2	6	4	10	15	14	16	83
Detention	6	2	11	6	3		3	3	4	14	8	5	65
Page/website shutdown	5	1	4	2	12	1		14	15	1	3		58
Summons	2	7	1	2	1	6	2	7	3	1	3	3	38
Targeting journalists' families										10	8	16	34
Destruction of journalists' homes							1			11	4	4	20
Damage to quipment	1	3							2	2	1	7	16
Threat		1		1	2	2	1	1		5	3		16
Ban on publication/ Distribution/Broadcast	2	8		1	1					1		1	14
Legal action		1	5	2		1					3		12
Delayed judiciary procedure	2	3			1				2		2	1	11
Travel/Entry ban	1						3	3					7
Cultural censorship		3		2			1					2	6
Torture								1	2			3	6
Pre-trial detention			1						3		1		5
Prison sentence	2							1			1		4
Defamation and hate speech	2			1									3
Hacking									1	1		1	3
Interrogation under pressure		1									1	1	3
Suspension/Closure of a media outlet		1								2			3
Confiscation of equipment								1			1		2
Abduction						1							1
Arbitrary dismissal	1												1
Fine							1						1
Grand Total	57	91	53	48	67	40	50	82	90	200	145	207	1130

Victims of Violations by Gender

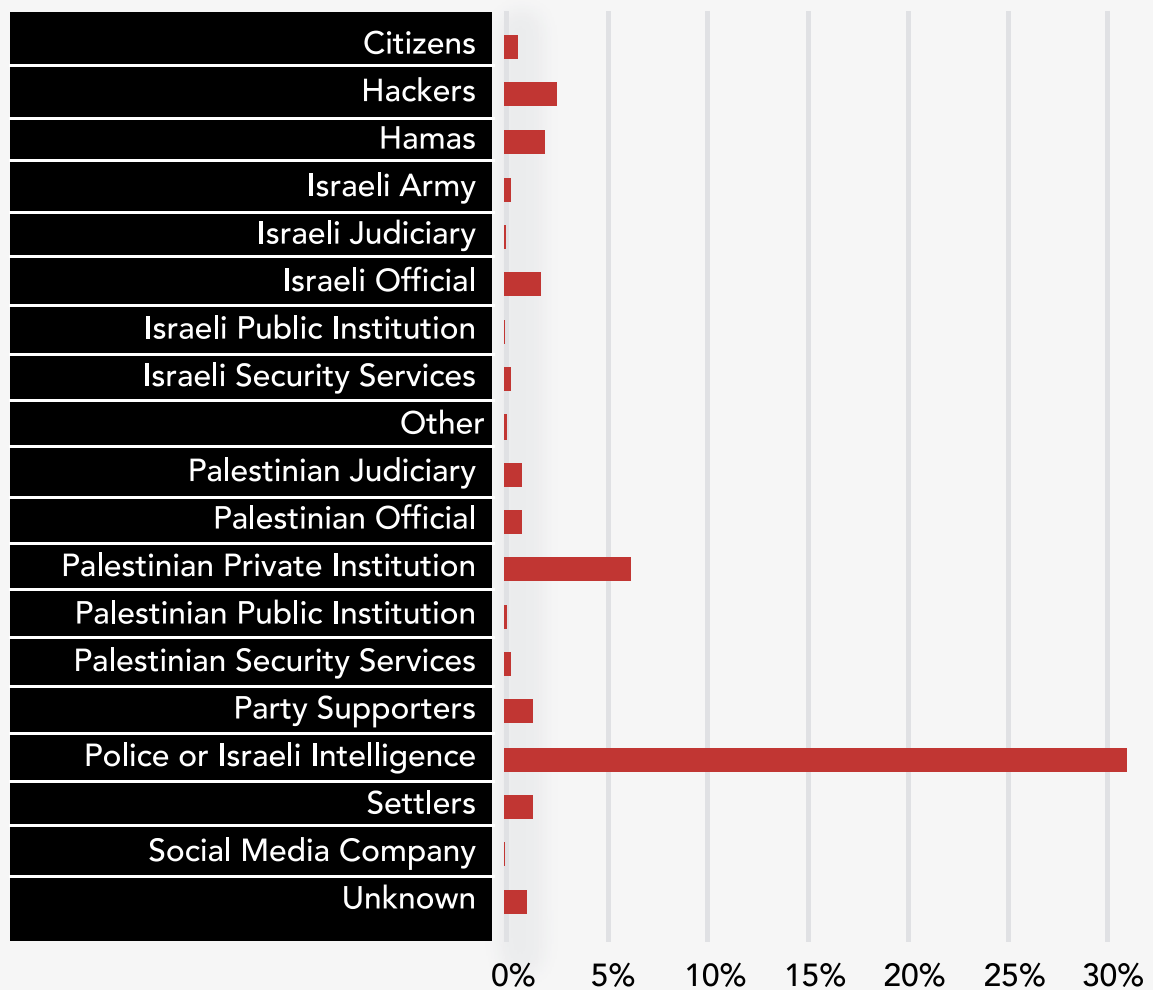


Female

Male

Violations by Responsible Party

Attacker



The Gaza Graveyard

Following the attack carried out by the Hamas on October 7, during which hundreds of Israelis were killed and dozens others were kidnapped, Israel responded by launching what soon became a genocidal war, committing war crimes against Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip. According to Gaza's Health Ministry and the United Nations, the Israeli army had, by the end of the year, killed more than 22,000 Palestinian civilians and injured 60,000 more, with approximately 70% of the casualties being children and women. Entire families were wiped from civil records and, according to UNRWA, 90% of Gaza's population was displaced. Israeli airstrikes destroyed hundreds of thousands of residential units, dozens of hospitals and medical facilities, hundreds of schools, universities, and cultural centers, erasing entire residential neighborhoods and landmarks of Gaza's cities.

During this war, Israel intensified its targeting of Palestinian media workers, particularly journalists and photographers. Never before has such a number of journalists been killed in such a short period of time. This was accompanied by numerous arrests and shootings carried out in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and other Palestinian cities.

Israel's military campaign resulted in the killing of 110 journalists by December 31. RSF described Gaza as the "graveyard of journalists." In addition to killing more than 18 artists, poets, and writers, most of whom were young people under the age of forty, the deliberate and systematic targeting of media workers left many journalists and reporters bleeding to death. Some journalists even received the news of their relatives being killed on air, as was the case with Al Jazeera correspondent Wael Al-Dahdouh, who lost five members of his family, including his son, photographer Hamza Al-Dahdouh. Journalist Anas Al-Shareef, who had received threats from the Israeli army to stop covering the military operations in northern Gaza, had his house bombed, leading to the killing of his father and several members of his family. More than 50 journalists and photographers were injured, with some receiving treatment, while others remain unable to secure care due to the inability of hospitals and medical staff to perform the necessary operations. Some lost their lives while waiting for an opportunity to be evacuated from Gaza, as was the case with journalist Akram Al-Shafei.

Overall, the situation of journalists is no different than that of the rest of Gaza's residents. More than 1,200 journalists were displaced from their homes, becoming refugees in hospitals and shelters in the southern areas of Gaza, specifically in Rafah, amid a shortage of basic necessities such as food and water. In fact, the displacement of the majority of journalists from Gaza City and the northern Gaza Strip led to an almost complete blackout on the atrocities committed by the Israeli army.

Among the first persons who went missing since the morning of October 7 are journalist Nidal Al-Wahidi and photographer Haitham Abdelwahid. The Israeli army refused to provide any information about them. Following the ground invasion of the Gaza Strip, specifically its northern region, the Israeli army arrested six additional journalists and used various tools of torture and humiliation, as happened with the office director of Al-Araby Al-Jadeed newspaper Daa Al-Kahlout and photographer Saeed Al-Kilani.

Moreover, Israeli warplanes completely or partially damaged around 60 local and foreign media institutions, in addition to destroying a number of historical sites, cultural institutions, and theaters, including the Rashad Al-Shawwa Foundation Theater, Hakawati Culture and Arts Foundation Theater, and Al-Azhar University Theater, alongside dozens of libraries and private

publishing houses. This was accompanied by a deliberate shutdown policy, permanently cutting off electricity since the beginning of the war, and repeatedly cutting off cellular communication and the internet. This hindered the work of journalists and photographers in sending their written, televised, and photographic reports to the institutions with which they work.

Challenges of West Bank Journalists

Even before October 7, 2023 was not an easy year for Palestinian journalists and photographers in the West Bank. Israeli forces continued their routine military incursions into different Palestinian cities and refugee camps, resulting in restrictions and violations against journalists.

During the first ten months of 2023, journalists faced physical targeting and obstruction of movement during military operations conducted by the Israeli army inside cities, towns, and camps. Media coverage became costly and challenging, with dozens reporting injuries from bullets, as well as gas and sound bombs. These projectiles were deliberately aimed at sensitive parts of their bodies, such as the neck and face, to inflict maximum physical harm. Additionally, Israeli military vehicles frequently attempted to run them over. Journalists also encountered intimidation, obstruction, hours-long detention, and unlawful administrative imprisonments. Armed settler attacks against Palestinian journalists increased in the West Bank, with journalists facing violence and assaults, under the Israeli army protection.

After October 7, the situation worsened in the West Bank, with daily Israeli army raids and settler attacks against Palestinians in different regions. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Ramallah, the number of Palestinian casualties in the West Bank since October 7 reached 275 by the end of the year. Israeli forces became increasingly aggressive and violent against journalists, arbitrarily arresting more than 45 media professionals since October. While 15 were later released, the remaining detainees endure harsh and inhumane detention conditions. Family members of some journalists were also arrested to pressure them into submission.

Restrictions on Journalists inside Israel

Palestinian journalists, photographers, and artists residing in the 1948 Territories are facing rising intimidation and restrictions on their work, a situation that has escalated since the onset of the war on Gaza. Various actors, including the police, military and security personnel, and settlers, are responsible for these violations. They have included assaults, physical obstruction of journalistic activities, preventing coverage of attacks on Palestinians near significant sites, and restricting reporting on solidarity protests within Israel.

Since the war on Gaza, the Israeli police has arrested Palestinian artists on charges of “incitement” for expressing sympathy with Palestinians in Gaza on social media or sharing slogans hinting at any form of protest against the war. Some were subjected to house arrest and fines, such as Palestinian artists Dalal Abu Amneh and Maisaa Abdel Hadi.

The accusation of “incitement” has been utilized by Israel even before October 7 to target journalists and intellectuals, albeit to a lesser degree. The Israeli Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, issued a decision to close all offices of the “Voice of Palestine” radio and

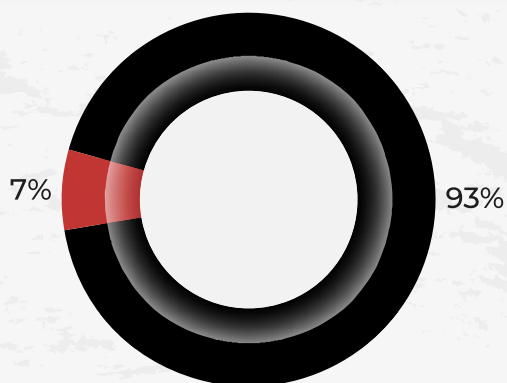
television in Israel. Similarly, the Tel Aviv University administration took actions to prevent the organization of an exhibition of Arab books. Most notably, following the war on Gaza, the Israeli war cabinet banned Al-Mayadeen news channel and barred its crews from working and covering events in Israel citing "security reasons," relying on emergency regulations allowing the closure of offices, confiscation of broadcasting equipment, and prevention of building necessary communication infrastructures.



Syria

Violations	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Arrest	2		1	1	2	1		4	2	1	1		15
Physical assault/					1	2		1	2	1		6	13
Job obstruction						2	3						5
Killing								1			1		2
Legal action		1			1								2
Arbitrary dismissal										1			1
Assassination				1									1
Attack against							1						1
Detention												1	1
Prison sentence	1												1
Hacking							1						1
Grand Total	3	1	1	2	4	5	5	6	4	3	2	7	43

Victims of Violations by Gender

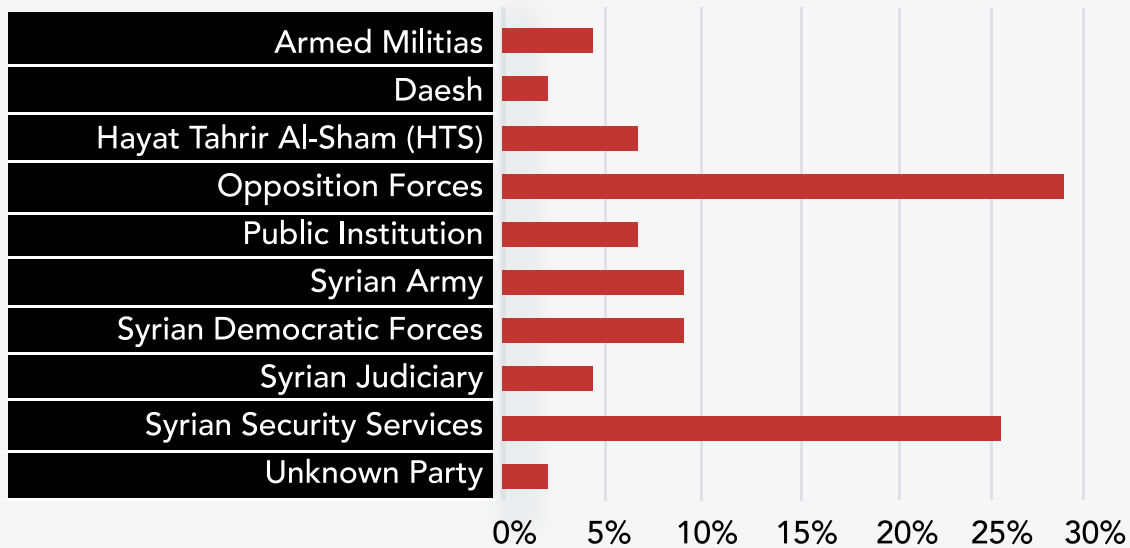


Female

Male

Violations by Responsible Party

Attacker



The “Assad Way” Spreads

In Syria, after 50 years and counting of a brutal dictatorship, discussions on humanitarian crises, economics, politics, war, and freedoms have become almost pointless. In a nation ruled by a mob willing to resort to mass killings to maintain its grip on power, Bashar Al-Assad swiftly seized upon the massive earthquake of February 6, 2023, to accelerate the pace of Arab and international normalization with his regime under the guise of providing humanitarian aid for the victims. With Russian backing, Assad negotiated agreements for control of border crossings with Turkey and over relief efforts in areas under Syrian opposition control in northwest Syria.

Attending the Arab Summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in May, Assad emerged from a twelve-year banishment from the Arab League. Presenting himself as a “victorious” leader, he expressed hope that the summit would usher in “a new era of Arab cooperation for peace, development, and prosperity, rather than of war and destruction.” Yet, this narrative rings hollow given the entrenched presence of Iranian and Russian forces in Syria, in addition to US special forces and a myriad foreign-sponsored militias.

UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen proposed a “step by step” approach in 2023, claiming support from Europe, the United States, and Arab nations. However, Assad remained passive, continuing arrests, releasing no prisoners, and failing to address the growing international catastrophe of drug smuggling. He offered no solutions for the plight of refugees or their safe return, failing to instill confidence in his declared intentions. Amid his continued despotism, civil activism saw a resurgence, exemplified by the Sweida uprising starting in August.

Ongoing civil protests in Sweida, mirrored by similar actions in opposition-held areas and among the Syrian diaspora, underscored that the Syrian crisis is far from concluded. Syrians seek control over their own destiny, unswayed by Arab summit strategies or stalled international initiatives. In response, the regime resorted to violence, particularly in Sweida, where military action against civilians lacked the usual pretext of fundamentalist factions and Sunni terror threats against minorities. Yet, Syrians harbor legitimate fears of a potential, opportunistic resurgence of ISIS in Sweida.

While Sweida pursued a hopeful path through civil action, northeastern regions witnessed their own upheavals. Armed clashes erupted between Arab tribes in Deir ez-Zor and the Kurdish-controlled Syrian Democratic Forces. Towards year-end, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, formerly Al-Nusra Front, saw a high-profile defection by one of its top commanders, Jihad Issa, also known as Abu Ahmad Zakour, abandoning Al-Qaeda affiliated leader Abu Mohammad Al-Jolani. The latter governs most areas in Idlib through the so-called “Salvation Government.” Journalists in these areas have frequently been the victims of violent actions perpetrated by the countless of armed factions vying for territorial control.

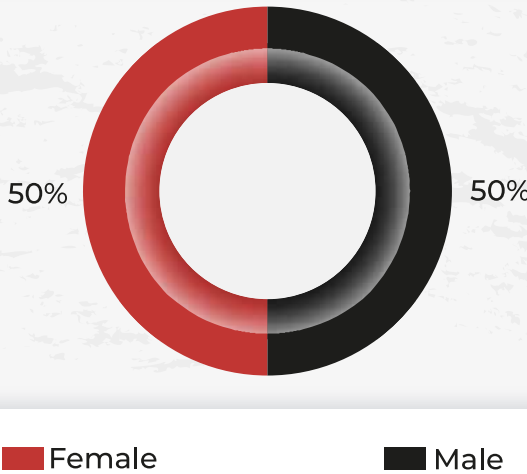
The tragedy of Syria lies not solely in bloodshed or prolonged suffering but in its use as an argument against the international community’s discourse on human rights in the region. Syria’s plight serves as an example for other authoritarian regimes worldwide, suggesting that they can commit atrocities with impunity and still find a seat at the negotiations table for reconciliation and reconstruction. The ongoing events in Gaza since October 7, 2023, echo Assad’s brutal model and serve as a stark reminder of the challenges ahead on the road towards accountability.



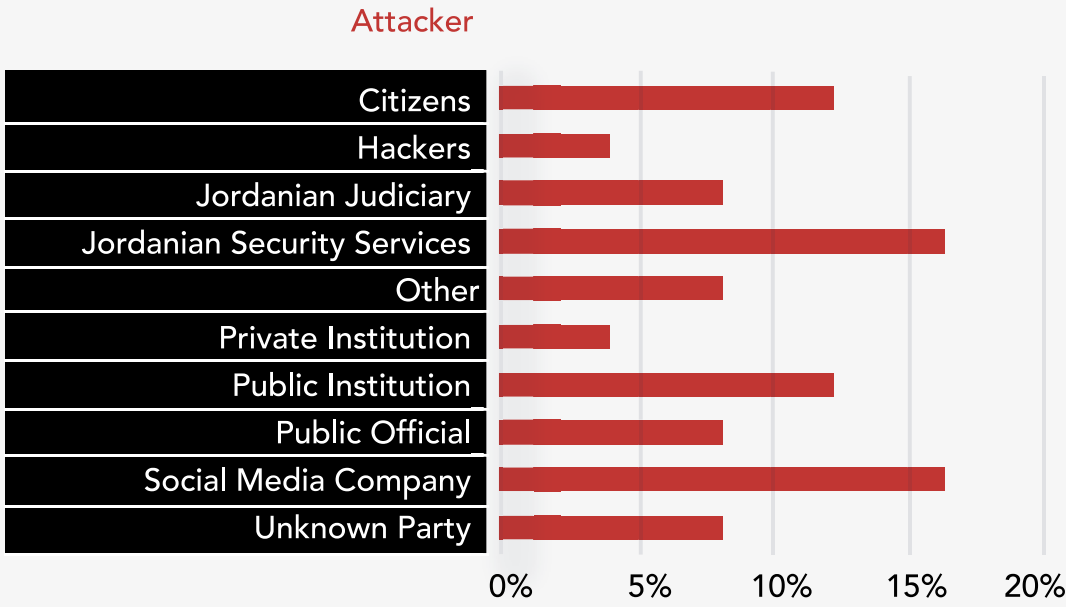
Jordan

Violations	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Arbitrary dismissal							2						2
Arrest								1					1
Cultural censorship		1											1
Defamation and hate speech										1	1		2
Hacking										1	1		2
Job obstruction	1						1		1	3			6
Page/Website shutdown							1			1	2	1	5
Prison sentence								2					2
Attack against property		1											1
Physical assault/Injuries	1												1
Damage to equipment		1											1
Grand Total	1	3					4	3	1	6	4	1	24

Victims of Violations by Gender



Violations by Responsible Party



Character (and Media Freedom) Assassination

“Backwards, we go...” This encapsulates the current states of media freedoms in Jordan. In essence, rather than progressing to enhance media freedoms, there has been a clear regression in 2023.

Observers monitoring the fluctuations in media freedom status in Jordan over the past decade recognize deep concerns regarding the constant pressures faced by journalists and media professionals. A decade ago, there was a widespread belief among pundits that Jordan had the potential to break through the glass ceiling historically imposed by authoritarian governments in the Arab world; however, many now admit to feeling disappointed.

Yet, it would be unfair not to acknowledge the genuine advancements in media freedom that occurred previously, particularly influenced by a course initiated by the Arab Spring of 2011. Nevertheless, reform was abruptly halted, evident today in the latest amendments to the Electronic Crimes Law in 2023, approved by royal decree on August 12. While initial objections focused on clauses posing threats to journalists and activists, notably Article 11, the amendments failed to address these concerns. Instead, they expanded the scope of restrictions on media and free expression, granting the government greater control over the digital sphere.

For example, Article 5 explicitly stipulates: “Anyone who creates an account, page, group, channel, or equivalent on social media platforms, and falsely attributes it to a natural or legal entity shall be punished by imprisonment for a period not less than three months, or a fine of not less than JOD 1,500 (USD 2,100 dollars), and not exceeding JOD 15,000 (USD 21,000), or by both of these penalties.”

The law also holds individuals responsible for social media management potentially accountable for “illegal content,” subjecting them to punishment for crimes committed contrary to the provisions of the Electronic Crimes Law. This emphasizes the criminalization of “character assassination,” with potential penalties including a prison sentence of not less than three months, a fine of not less than JOD 25,000 (USD 35,000), and not exceeding JOD 50,000 (USD 70,000). Notably, the parliament refrained from clearly defining the term “character assassination.”

Following the approval of the law, Jordanian journalists are grappling with a crucial question: “What should we then write about?” Paralysis, fear, and frustration prevail among journalists who cannot afford to risk imprisonment under precarious conditions.

Many Jordanian journalists are contemplating abandoning a profession that has become stifling in every aspect due to increasing restrictions. Responding with desperation, they question whether becoming journalists was the right decision at all.

Unraveling Information Manipulation



Information Manipulation in Lebanon and the Region

In the dynamic realm of information, the adage “History is written by the victors” reverberates, underlining the persistent power gap that the ostensibly democratized social media landscape could not reduce. Governments, dominant political factions, and various state and state-affiliated actors retain the means to shape narratives, perpetuating the nuanced yet powerful phenomenon of information manipulation. Over the past year, SKF, in collaboration with partners from the research and data analysis sectors, embarked on a comprehensive exploration of the digital sphere. The objective was to unravel patterns and draw substantive conclusions about the pervasive role of information manipulation, focusing primarily on Lebanon. Nevertheless, SKF ventured into [assessing the situation in other countries](#), such as Iraq and Sudan, to broaden our perspective, enabling us to discern regional dynamics.

The Media’s Role in this Context

The media, traditionally regarded as the Fourth Estate, remains a crucial force in shaping public opinion. Traditional Lebanese media outlets have systematically and strategically contributed to exacerbating historical tensions and perpetuating socio-political divisions, forsaking fundamental values of the profession, undermining their contribution to enhanced accountability, and transforming journalism into merely another element in a larger political toolbox. Funding sources and ratings considerations deeply influence editorial decisions, prompting pertinent questions about independence and journalistic integrity. In Lebanon, traditional media continues to serve as the primary source of information, though the landscape is evolving, especially among the younger audience. Social media platforms, particularly local news pages on Facebook and Instagram, have gained prominence. Simultaneously, WhatsApp groups have emerged as significant conduits for news consumption, deemed trustworthy by a major portion of the audience. This shift reflects the public’s diminishing faith in traditional outlets, largely due to their perceived politicization and partisanship, as concluded by an SKF study titled “[Mis- and Disinformation: Media Perception and Consumption of Fake News in Lebanon](#).”

SKF’s Contribution to the Discussion

SKF’s commitment to a data-driven approach, coupled with its fundamentally collaborative genes, has been pivotal in advancing our understanding of information manipulation. Our contributions to this discussion emphasize the multifaceted nature of this challenge and the need for a comprehensive take to better understand and combat it. Indeed, we have observed some positive developments among social media users’ stances around human rights when well-organized political parties refrained from engaging in an online discussion. However, amid Lebanon’s escalating political polarization, our social media monitoring initiative has brought to light not only an [alarming](#) increase in hate speech dissemination but also persistent patterns of manipulation tactics such as spamming organized and strategically targeted disinformation that promotes political narratives.

A closer examination across various platforms reveals the cultivation of an illusory environment by cyber armies associated with specific political actors, particularly on platforms like X. Parties such as Hezbollah and FPM, with significant online presence, have played pivotal roles in this phenomenon. This was concluded from a report by SKF titled “[Navigating Freedom](#):

[Making Sense of Lebanon's Digital Discourse on Free Expression](#)," which unveiled a crucial relationship between online responses and three fundamental variables: intensity (number of accounts and tweets), the political affiliation of engaging accounts, and the sensitivity of the topic to responders.

Furthermore, in a [study](#) conducted by SKF on the online behavior of political parties during the 2022 parliamentary election campaigns, Hezbollah partisans and supporters were identified as the primary actors in information manipulation. Key tactics included exploiting or fabricating their opponents' affiliations with external forces to enhance the Hezbollah-endorsed candidates' image among the public, in addition to ad hominem attacks. The report highlights how sectarian forces in Lebanon effectively co-opted the digital sphere, transforming it into a polarizing platform where identity-based sentiments are perpetuated and nuanced voices are crowded out.

The WhatsApp messaging application has become a major source of news, potentially connecting with three-quarters of WhatsApp users in Lebanon, and news groups on the platform have exponentially increased since the October 17, 2019 uprising and the COVID-19 pandemic. The events that occurred since October 2019, including the uprising, the pandemic, the rapid fall of the Lebanese pound against the US dollar, and the February 2023 earthquake in Turkey and Syria, have together forced the Lebanese public to be in a state of constant alert. This gave way to a mushrooming of news groups on WhatsApp, which provide rapid alerts and breaking news throughout the day. SKF dedicated an independent [study](#) to examine this unaccountable and chaotic environment of information spread and manipulation, allowing us to glean deeper insights. WhatsApp groups have a remarkably wide reach and are part of larger networks, enhancing the dissemination of content, making them a formidable tool to spread fear, speculation, and divisive narratives. The most critical element here remains the lack of accountability and ethical considerations that professional media outlets are legally and morally required to adhere to; this can have dire implications in the long run.

Insights on the Information Ecosystem

Information manipulation encompasses a spectrum of tactics with diverse aims, ranging from promoting a political narrative to the intimidation of dissident voices. SKF adopted a sophisticated approach to study and address this multi-tentacled phenomenon. The vulnerability of Lebanon's online environment to information manipulation raises critical questions about the future of human rights in Lebanon amid a challenging regional context.

Through meticulous comparative analysis of diverse datasets collected from both X and Facebook, SKF uncovered valuable insights into the interior architecture of public opinion in Lebanon and how it is reflected on social media platforms. On Facebook, for instance, public engagement with SKF's posts reflects a range of diverse political perspectives. Conversely, on X, which happens to be a preferred area for orchestrated campaigns, a specific narrative prevails, intentionally and noticeably populating the platform's interaction space. This strategic approach has been consistently employed by the dominant political parties, stifling the platform that pro-human rights activists previously often used to freely express their opinions, and turning X into a more abusive and dogmatic space. This behavior aims to restrict and ultimately shut down public debate, and it is succeeding. The toxic environment that it creates on social media platforms significantly decreases participation in online political discussions, alienating a large population and limiting contributions.

The virtual, digital space is evolving at an inconceivable pace. Its contribution to globalization and to diverse and complex human endeavors, and the universal utilization of its different functions and platforms, have made it an indispensable element of the daily lives of an increasingly digitalized human race. This comes with costs and responsibilities. The fact that the platforms that created or contributed the mechanisms and the tools that established this digital reality are themselves private enterprises does not change the other, much more important fact, that this virtual space is, or has become, before anything else, a de facto public space. This stipulates that platform administrators who populate this digital, public space, and moderate and manage the interactions within it, have a responsibility to protect the public good that it represents. In that sense, these platforms are responsible and must be held accountable for ensuring the safe and free access, utilization, and enjoyment of their “social” products. While policies exist to regulate access and utilization, significant questions remain about how safe, free, and equal access and utilization are. For example, SKF conducted a two-year [study](#) (2021-2022) on hate speech, a thriving instrument of intimidation and oppression that has been weaponized by authoritarian and reactionary forces in their war against freedoms, human rights, and democracy, contributing to the silencing and elimination of progressive voices across the globe. Lebanon had its fair share. On one occasion that SKF examined closely, a surge in targeted online hate speech preceded the actual assassination of publisher and political activist Lokman Slim.

The threat this poses to freedom of speech makes it imperative that it is collaboratively addressed, involving multiple stakeholders, including platforms and media freedom advocates. SKF took the initiative to [examine hate speech policies](#) across major platforms, including Facebook, X, YouTube, and TikTok, outlining both commitments and inconsistencies. A fundamental premise for this examination was accessibility. Given that these platforms serve, literally, the global community, it was essential to determine if policies are available in the languages of the populations that are using these platforms. Taking Lebanon as an example, SKF checked the availability of policies in Arabic, the official language of Lebanon, as one of the criteria of evaluation. Other criteria included the availability of policies addressing the protection of human rights and prohibiting abusive behavior, and the availability of an accessible complaints mechanism. While all platforms have translated policies into Arabic, Facebook’s policies exhibited the most discrepancies between English and Arabic. Notably, TikTok lacked an explicit commitment to upholding human rights, including freedom of expression. Moreover, the right-to-privacy policy on TikTok does not align with international human rights standards. All platforms utilize algorithms for content ranking and moderation, raising concerns about potential breaches of human rights and the repression of freedom of expression, particularly in the Arabic language.

Expectations

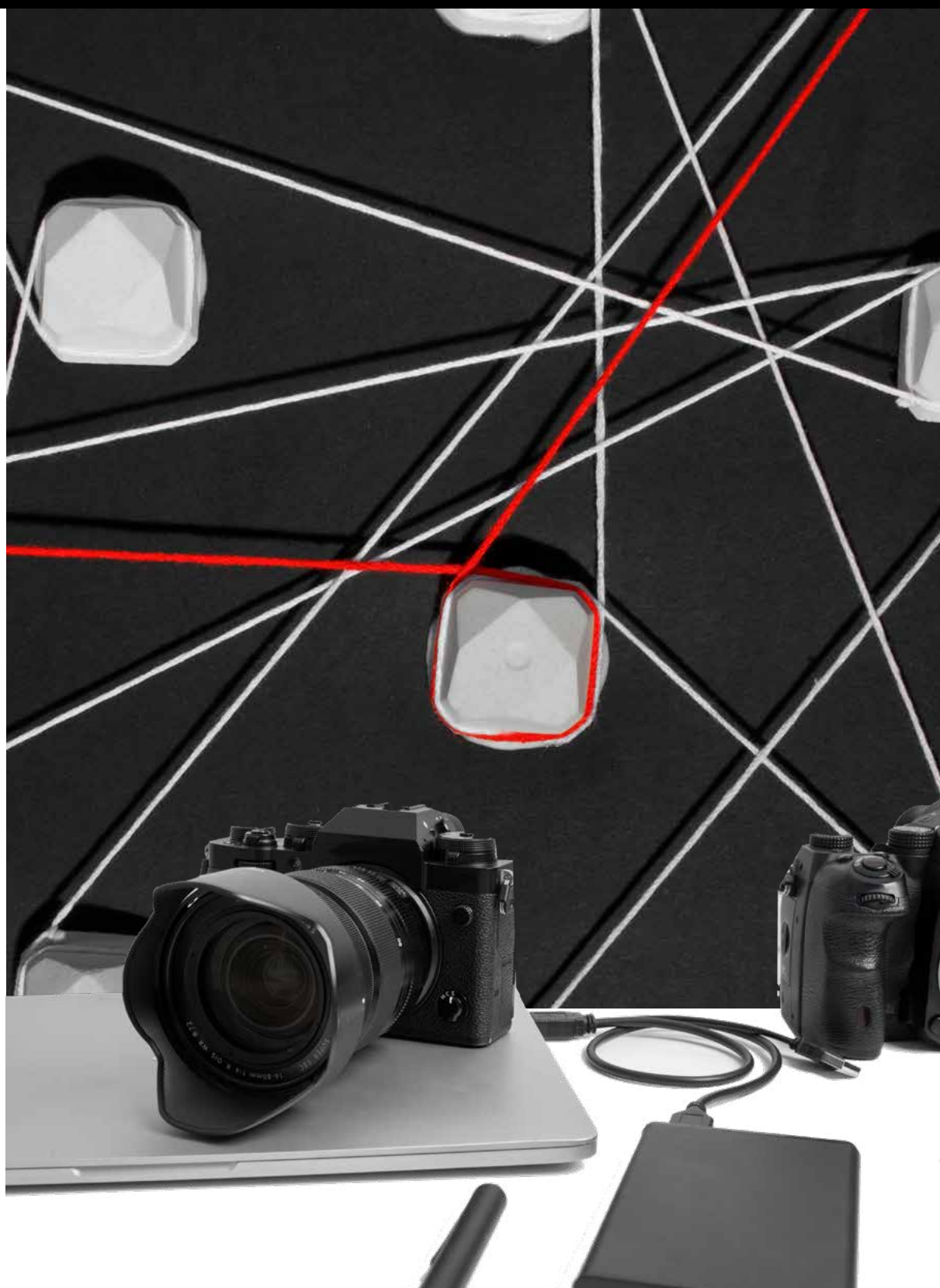
Looking ahead, vigilance and initiative must be maintained as the future of human rights in Lebanon and the broader region is ambiguous, to say the least. The dynamic challenge of media manipulation demands continuous adaptation and refinement of strategies by SKF. The insights garnered from our collaborative efforts serve as a foundation for future initiatives, strategically designed to foster a more informed, resilient, and critically literate society.

Counteracting disinformation and sensationalism require an in-depth understanding of public responses, the impact on views, and the tactics employed by state agencies. Recognizing that combating information manipulation is a long-term endeavor, civil society organizations and stakeholders must enhance collaborative efforts. Empowering journalists and fact-checkers

while integrating fact-checking as a core value and practice within journalism emerges as critical for rebuilding public trust in the media.

In summary, our comprehensive exploration into information manipulation underscores the urgency of addressing this universal issue. SKF, equipped with a comprehensive understanding of its nuances and armed with proactive measures, holds a key position in contributing meaningfully to address its profound implications for human rights and freedom of expression.

Support for Independent Media



Media Development for Sustainable Independence

The events of 2023 and the intensifying threats to free speech and journalism, both from within and outside our borders, have underscored the crucial need to reinforce the financial and institutional sustainability of independent media outlets in Lebanon and the Levant. The ongoing multifaceted crisis in Lebanon continues to impede the development of early- and growth-stage startups and initiatives. Obstructions stem from technical obstacles such as limited access to financing and the banking system, as well as unjustified censorship and deplatforming on social media networks.

Conversely, funding for media outlets documenting the Palestinians' suffering and the situation in Gaza became threatened by the clear alignment of major donor governments with the Israeli narrative. Nonetheless, independent outlets persisted in reporting on the tragic events in Gaza and the West Bank, despite the escalating risk of losing further donor funding. Thanks to their daily monitoring of war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law, global public support for Palestine has gradually increased, exerting additional pressure on Western nations to reconsider their biases.

Considering the aforementioned challenges, SKF intensified its efforts to offer capacity development and financial assistance to over 30 media outlets. These endeavors aim to enhance their revenue diversification strategies, making them less susceptible to fluctuations in donor funding.

Media Sustainability and the Trust Crisis

The SKF Media Incubator program continued to provide organizational and technical assistance to 15 independent media outlets in Lebanon and Palestine to enhance their economic and institutional viability. Local and foreign experts offered support through mentoring and consultancies tailored to the specific needs of each outlet, both online and in-person – in Amman, Jordan for Palestinian outlets. The program focused on developing capacities in areas such as digital security, physical safety, editorial innovation, organizational development, fundraising, digital outreach, and financial sustainability.

In an ongoing effort to address the escalating public distrust in media and journalists, SKF partnered with RSF to advocate for the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI) among Lebanese and Arab region-based media organizations. JTI serves as a standardization transparency tool for credible news media, rewarding adherence to professional norms and ethics. SKF conducted awareness events and workshops in Beirut and Amman – in addition to online sessions – to promote the JTI certification and empower media outlets with trustworthy news content. Furthermore, SKF will be providing personalized consultancies to assist interested media outlets in completing their JTI certification process.

Diversifying Revenue Streams

Securing funding for investigative journalism remains paramount, given that independent journalists and free media stand as the last pillar in holding elected and government officials accountable, particularly in the absence of an effective judiciary. Despite the prevalence of

impunity, it is imperative to continue exposing corruption and illegal practices in the public and private sectors in front of the local and international communities. Therefore, SKF remains committed to providing investigative grants to media outlets, allowing them to delve deeper into topics of high interest and sensitivity. Additionally, SKF offers grantees comprehensive technical support and experts' mentoring to help them achieve their investigative objectives.

The past decade has witnessed the emergence of a new generation of independent Arab media outlets in the digital sphere, effectively reaching new – predominantly younger – audiences. In order to support these platforms in expanding their reach beyond the frame of their social media channels, SKF introduced the online aggregator website, [Skroll Media](#). Skroll is designed to curate and promote high-quality multimedia content (such as investigative reports, long-form articles, and documentaries) produced by Lebanese and Arab independent outlets. Furthermore, the platform enables member outlets to publish paid content on a pay-per-click basis, thereby securing an additional revenue stream to bolster their financial sustainability and independence. Skroll users will have the option to recharge their credit balance online or through physical top-up cards. Additionally, they can make donations through the aggregator to support their preferred publishers.

The services of “Agency for Equality” (AE), SKF’s sister organization dedicated to creating advertising opportunities to independent media outlets, are ever more needed. AE remains committed to supporting independent media outlets in Lebanon, Tunisia, and Jordan, successfully executing over a dozen campaigns to date. The Agency has connected media outlets to local producers, service providers, private organizations, and international NGOs. AE’s support not only secures additional income for media outlets through campaign production but also enhances their in-house advertising capabilities and introduces them to a market of production service opportunities. While the income generated from campaigns may not match the funds provided by donors to media outlets, it represents a significant step towards achieving greater financial sustainability. Moving forward, AE and its co-founders – SKF and ERIM – are actively exploring opportunities for expansion into other Arab countries, having identified potential markets for their services.

The 18th Edition of the Samir Kassir Award



FOR FREEDOM OF THE PRESS



The 18th edition of the Samir Kassir Award for Freedom of the Press unfolded amidst a global crisis, underscoring the imperative protection of press freedom in nations grappling with challenges like media restrictions, censorship, journalist harassment, and curtailed freedom of expression. This European Union award, dedicated to fostering independent, profound journalism, recognizes journalists from 18 MENA and Gulf countries, for their exceptional work and unwavering commitment to human rights and democracy — a beacon of hope amid the current adversities.

The competition was launched on March 1, 2023. Departing from conventional webinars, SKF's promotion strategy for the award adopted a novel approach, disseminating pertinent information through engaging videos featuring luminaries in journalism and media.

A total of 248 journalists competed in the award's three categories: opinion piece, investigative article, and audiovisual news report. Notably, this edition witnessed a record number of female candidates (97) and more entries from less-engaged countries like Algeria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

The award ceremony was held in Beirut on June 5, 2023, marking the 18th anniversary of Lebanese journalist Samir Kassir's assassination on June 2, 2005. The laureates of this year's award were:

- **Inas Hakky**, from Syria, in the opinion piece category, for her article titled "[An Open Letter to Jackie Chan](#)" published on July 25, 2022 in Raseef22. Hakky's article uses an innovative format in response to actor Jackie Chan's intended visit to Syria for filming purposes and highlights the grim reality in many of the country's regions that have been destroyed by years of conflict. Inas Hakky also won this year's Students' Prize.
- **Mahmoud Elsobky**, from Egypt, in the investigative article category, for his report titled "[Migration with Look-alike Passports](#)" published on July 6, 2022 on Al Jazeera's website. Elsobky's report dives in the murky waters of smugglers, illegal migration, and the black market of European travel documents.
- **Mohamad Chreyteh**, from Lebanon, in the audiovisual news report category, for his report titled "[Lebanese Drag Queens Brave Social and Political Pressure](#)" aired on Deutsche Welle Arabic on December 9, 2022. The report focuses on the challenges faced by Lebanon's LGBTQ+ community amid growing governmental and religious restrictions of their freedom of movement and association.

The 15th Edition
of the Beirut Spring Festival

BEIRUT
SPRING
FESTIVAL



In challenging socio-economic conditions and a fragmented political landscape, it is crucial to acknowledge and applaud the endeavors of civil society and non-governmental institutions in Lebanon that strive to nurture and sustain culture. During crises, culture is often sidelined, becoming a privilege for the privileged few. Yet, numerous individuals in the arts and culture field are tirelessly working to prevent it from becoming an elitist luxury, advocating for the principle of “culture by all and for all.” Festivals and cultural events have adapted to socio-economic shifts by either waiving entrance fees or making them more affordable.

Free admission stands as a cornerstone of the Beirut Spring Festival (BSF), a principle upheld by SKF since the establishment of the festival. BSF embodies Samir Kassir’s vision of Beirut as a cultural cradle in the Arab world, with its primary goal unchanged: providing free access to joyful and entertaining cultural events for people in Beirut and across Lebanon. In doing so, BSF exemplifies SKF’s enduring commitment to democratize access to culture in Lebanon.

BSF’s 15th edition paid a poignant tribute to the late Lebanese-Canadian writer and director, Majdi Bou Matar. This commemoration featured the play “**The Last 15 Seconds**,” with the support of the Canadian Embassy, at Tournesol Theatre. The play, featuring award-winning Lebanese actor Badih Abou Chakra, delved into the sensitive topic of terrorism, particularly exploring the tragic death of Syrian-American filmmaker Mustapha Akkad during coordinated terror attacks in Amman in 2005.

Additionally, the Festival showcased “**White Rabbit Red Rabbit**,” a play by Iranian writer Nassim Soleimanpour, starring the renowned Lebanese actor Fouad Yammine. Supported by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, this play is celebrated globally for its intense, comic, and unnerving narrative, drawing audiences into a journey exploring the limits of liberty. Fouad Yammine, a multifaceted Lebanese talent, brought his skill to the Monnot Theatre, captivating audiences with his performance as he discovered the script the moment he went on stage.

In 2023, SKF also announced a promising collaboration with Université Saint-Joseph, introducing an award for the best reader and the best writer through a competition for high-school students in Lebanese schools.

Outlook: Practicing a Theory of Necessary Change



In a turbulent region and within a challenging and highly disrupted media landscape, SKF has chosen to transcend the urge to simply describe the catastrophic nature of events in the Levant, resisting the temptation to respond to hardship with cynicism. Instead, we have capitalized on our theory of change.

First and foremost, we aim to expand our involvement in the creation of an engaged public opinion. The broader ecosystem of journalists, organizations, and personalities with whom we constantly interact through our activities and public presence are key stakeholders in achieving this objective. Building on our partnerships and engagement opportunities, SKF will contribute to the best of its capacities to the establishment of a larger, more inclusive space for public debate and trigger stronger, more informed citizen engagement within it.

Secondly, we will continue to invest in fostering an enabling environment for a sustainable and well-developed independent media sector across the region through various avenues of support. At the individual level, SKF will continue to provide journalists with technical support to strengthen their capacity to navigate the challenges of the profession, enhance their physical and digital safety instincts and preparedness, and ensure that journalists have access to enhanced mental health and legal assistance services. Recognizing the role of funding in securing sustainability for media outlets, SKF will further the deployment of innovative mechanisms to increase the ability of emerging independent media outlets to generate revenue and secure a lifeline for their content creation and journalistic work. Additionally, SKF will support the growth of a stronger, more robust investigative community and equip journalists with the tools to identify the networks and electronic armies that engage in organized disinformation that threatens rights-based social contracts.

An engaged public opinion can only emerge and endure the numerous challenges against it if it is embraced by a civil society that can advocate on behalf of the marginalized and the underprivileged. In countries plagued and governed by a corrupt few, freedoms and social justice become interconnected; one cannot exist without the other. Standing by the voiceless and championing their rights, while providing their plight with independent and objective communication channels, and an “informed” audience, represents the SKF model, guided by principles of freedom, equality, and justice. These three timeless and global values epitomize the kind of future that the Foundation works towards, both in Lebanon and the region. To that end, SKF will invest and mobilize every resource, capitalize on every relationship, and leverage every available advantage. Freedom of speech and a free media landscape are at the core of this endeavor.



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