

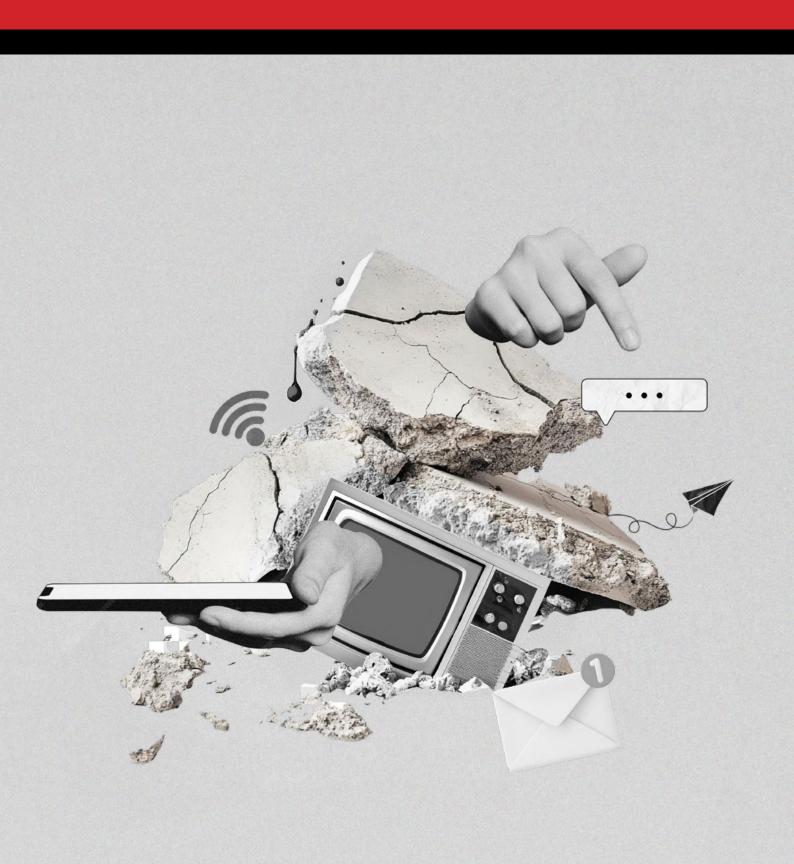


THE SAMIR KASSIR FOUNDATION

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Introduction: Journalism on the Brink



Imagine if someone switched off every form of news media available today. Everything gone. How would our world look then? What would we know about our surroundings, or about anything at all? How limited, narrow-minded, and inevitably unjust would our societies become? Now imagine this same individual, according to criteria guided solely by their own interests, selected a handful of media outlets to bring back online. Chances are, these chosen outlets would be ones they already owned or controlled. How misguided, delusional, and ultimately dystopian would we then become?

This bleak scenario might well become reality if the fate of journalism depended exclusively on political interests or uncertain, conditional funding. The recent decision by the US administration to freeze or suspend foreign aid, including support to media organizations, is a stark wake-up call. Not because funding for media should necessarily take precedence over other critical humanitarian needs, but because journalism, the very lens through which we interpret global events and political decisions, must not be at the mercy of political whims. It is also a clear indicator that our collective efforts to nurture resilient, independent, and professional media institutions have so far fallen short. These media outlets urgently need robust and sustainable mechanisms that protect them from sudden political and financial disruptions.

Yet, the challenges journalism faces today extend far beyond funding. The year 2024 presented irrefutable evidence of a systematic assault against journalists and truth-seekers. More than 120 journalists lost their lives in Gaza alone, and intentional targeting of media workers occurred repeatedly in Lebanon. Freedom of expression is at stake, too. The lines between right and wrong have hardened into absolutes, forcing politics and culture – and by extension, journalism – into stark, uncompromising binaries. The space for nuance, interpretation, and analysis is shrinking dramatically, replaced by narratives of dominance and hegemony. History reminds us vividly where this path leads: toward dreadful times indeed.

Amid these alarming developments, the dramatic collapse of the Assad regime in Syria stands out as a critical juncture. This historic event not only marks the end of decades of oppression but also presents a fragile window of opportunity for the rebirth of free expression and independent journalism in Syria. Yet, it also raises fundamental questions: Can Syrian media rebuild effectively after years of systematic repression, violence, and propaganda? And crucially, will Syria's evolving media landscape help reconcile a fractured society, or will it further inflame divisions?

From one annual report to the next, our future appears increasingly uncertain. Why is that? What have we missed? Why is the moderate, progressive agenda losing ground, leaving behind a vacuum filled only by extremist and fundamentalist discourse? These questions transcend the media community alone. But we must nevertheless be the first to pose them openly and encourage other stakeholders to participate in these critical conversations.

Yet another complexity arises from the recent global shift in information ecosystems. The unprecedented proliferation and sophisticated weaponization of social media have led us to a troubling crossroads. Should we pursue regulation, risking surrender of freedoms earned through generations of struggle and sacrifice? Should we retreat, allowing our hard-won liberties to become casualties of an unchecked digital battleground? Or should we mobilize all available resources, intellect, and capabilities

to develop a balanced system that ensures the full protection and respect of freedoms while simultaneously safeguarding society against the weaponization of information technology?

Over the past five years, the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) has marshaled considerable resources to help emerging media organizations develop sustainable business models – a crucial step toward addressing at least one of these pressing questions. The Foundation has doubled its investments in journalist protection, from safe hosting to physical safety and psychological support. We continue to seek innovative solutions to strengthen the productivity and revenue streams of journalists and media organizations. Our ongoing commitment includes reinforcing our disinformation-combatting frameworks, and expanding these capabilities to our media partners. Furthermore, we have actively engaged in nearly every global debate concerning the present and future of journalism, as both a profession and a vital public mission.

Ultimately, responding to today's formidable challenges demands a holistic, coordinated approach. We believe this is achievable through strengthened global collaboration – one that brings together the capacities and resources of independent media organizations, human rights defenders, academia, socially responsible business leaders, and political allies worldwide.

SKF International Partners in 2024



In alphabetical order:



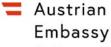
A Culture of Safety (ACOS) Alliance



Agency for Equality (AE)



Atlantic Council - Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)



Beirut

Austrian Embassy in Lebanon



BBC Media Action



CFI – French Media Cooperation Agency



Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)



Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

The Elephant in the Room (EITR)



Equal Rights and Independent Media (ERIM)



European Endowment for Democracy (EED)



European Union (EU)



Free Press Unlimited (FPU)



French Development Agency (AFD)



Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF)



Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD)



Global Media Registry (GMR)



Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)



Information Systems Security Association (ISSA) France





International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM)



International Media Support (IMS)



International Media Support Group (IMSG)



International News Safety Institute (INSI)



Journalisme et Citoyenneté (J&C)



Media Diversity Institute (MDI)



National Endowment for Democracy (NED)



Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs











SIGRID RAUSING TRUST Sigrid Rausing Trust (SRT)



Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF)



United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF)



United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)



United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

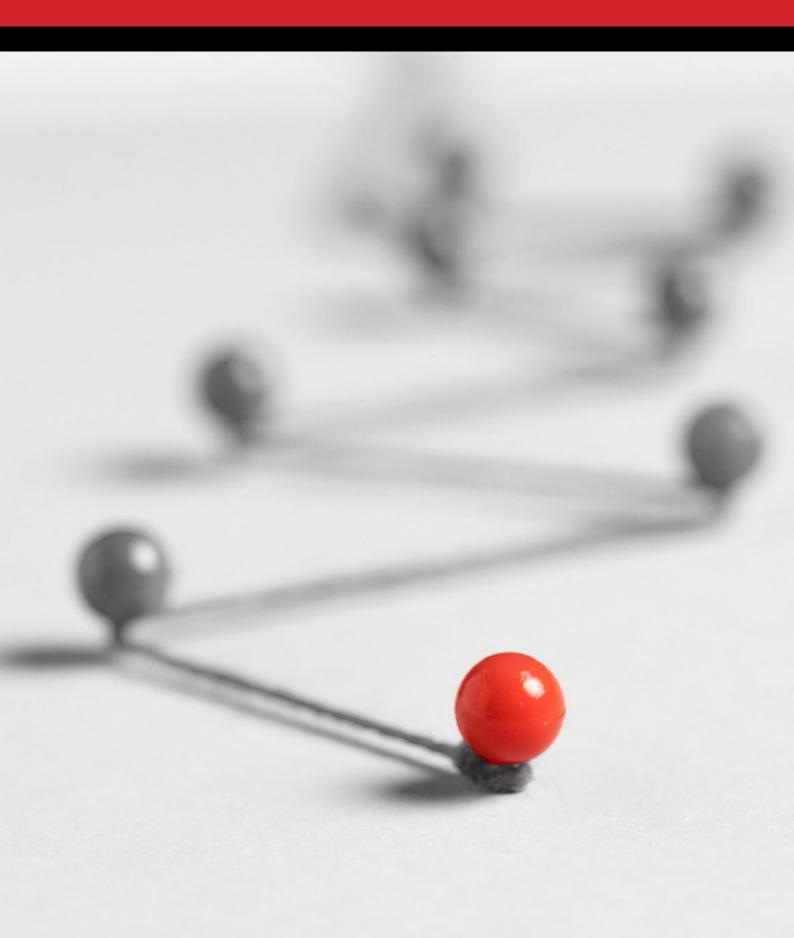


United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)



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

Key Milestones of the Year





January 30

SKF publishes a report titled "Public Opinion Perspectives on Governance and Civil Society in Lebanon" by researcher Mirna Ghanem. This survey, conducted in partnership with Information International, and supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, explores the public's attitude towards and trust in the most important players in Lebanon's public policy field.

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February 8

SKF publishes a report titled "The Struggles of Women Journalists in Lebanon" by research and program officer Nadine Moubarak, with support from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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February 13

SKF holds a workshop on freedom of expression and the Lebanese legal framework at the headquarters of the Tripoli Bar Association.

February 16

SKF executive director Ayman Mhanna and program manager Wael Akiki represent SKF at the "Journalism on both shores of the Mediterranean: The urgent need to talk to each other" seminar at the Arab World Institute in Paris, France, organized by J&C with EU support.

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March 5-6

SKF holds a workshop on Artificial Intelligence in journalism in partnership with the Austrian Embassy in Lebanon.

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March 12

SKF publishes a report titled "Perception and Consumption of Hate Speech in the Lebanese Media" by senior journalist Nidal Ayoub – a qualitative research, conducted as part of "Inclusive Media, Cohesive Society" (IMeCS) program.

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March 15

SKF publishes a report titled "Towards a Modern Personal Data Protection Law in Lebanon" produced in partnership with Seeds for Legal Initiatives with UNDEF support.

March 21-24

SKF holds a newsroom safety management workshop delivered by IMSG, with support from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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March 25-29

SKF hosts a Hostile Environment and First Aid Training (HEFAT) in Naas, Mount Lebanon, in cooperation with ACOS Alliance, RPT, GCHR, and Maharat Foundation, delivered by IMSG, with support from the Dutch MinistryofForeignAffairs.



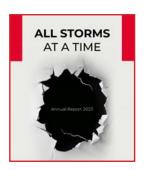
April 2

SKF publishes a report titled "Defending Media Freedom: Insights from Lebanese Journalists" by researchers Karim Safieddine, Jad Safwan and Mirna Ghanem, capturing the result of a survey conducted in collaboration with ELKA Lebanon, with UNDEF support.

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April 11

Nadine Moubarak represents SKF at the EED conference in Brussels titled "Echoes Across Continents – Briding the gap between journalists in Europe and in the MENA region."



April 16

SKF publishes its 2023 Annual Report, titled "All Storms at a Time" compiled by program manager Samer Abdallah.

May 2-3

Program manager Christelle El Hayek speaks on a panel on impunity and violence against journalists on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day at the Free University of Brussels, Belgium.

ONLINE HATE AND
THE FRAGILITY OF
LEBANON' SOCIAL FABRIC
THE PICIFAL DEBATE AROUND
PASCAL SLEIMAN'S KIDNAPPING
AND KILLING

May 13

SKF publishes a report titled "Online Hate and the Fragility of Lebanon's Social Fabric – The Digital Debate around Pascal Sleiman's Kidnapping and Killing" by InflueAnswers CEO Ralph Baydoun, as part of the IMeCS program.

May 15

SKF publishes a report titled "Orchestrated Hate: Analyzing the Online Attacks Against Shaden Fakih" by researcher Jad Hani, with support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreigraffairs.

May 23-25

Ayman Mhanna represents SKF at the International Press Institute (IPI) World Congress and Media Innovation Festival 2024 in Sarajevo, Bosnia Herzegovina, and speaks on a panel entitled "Under fire, unprotected: What journalists covering the Israel-Gaza war need now."

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May 24

Nadine Moubarak discusses digital justice and digital rights in the scope of freedom of expression at a conference organized by the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND) in Beirut.

May 27-29

Wael Akiki represents SKF at the WAN-IFRA World News Congress in Copenhagen, Denmark.

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May 30-June 20



SKF holds the 16th edition of the Beirut Spring Festival.

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June 4



The EU Delegation in Lebanon and SKF host the 19th Samir Kassir Award ceremony at the Sursock Palace Gardens in Beirut.

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June 20-July 20

Nadine Moubarak takes part in the Summer School on Human Rights in Strasbourg, France, with FNF support.



August 21

SKF publishes a report titled "<u>Not Walking the Talk – A Two-Year Monitoring Journey of MPs' Human Rights-Related Statements</u>" by Nadine Moubarak, with support from UNDEF and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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September 1-10

SKF cultural program director Randa Asmar attends, as guest of honor, the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre in Egypt.

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September 23

SKF launches the Emegency Journalism Assistance Fund (EJAF) to support journalists affected by the Israel-Hezbollah war.

October 7

J&C, in cooperation with SKF and RSF, hosts a solidarity event with Lebanese journalists amid the war, at the Arab World Institute in Paris.

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October 22-23

Program managers Christelle El Hayek and Nayla Abdelnour represent SKF at the ACOS Alliance annual meeting in London, United Kingdom.

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October 30

Ayman Mhanna joins the webinar titled "Media Actors and the Deconstruction of the 'Other'" organized by UNDP, GFMD, and Search for Common Ground.

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November 6-7

Ayman Mhanna attends the annual State of Europe conference in Brussels, organized by Friends of Europe.

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November 12



SKF publishes a report titled "Propaganda and Psychological Warfare in the Israeli-Hezbollah Conflict" by InflueAnswers CEO Ralph Baydoun, as part of the "Independent Media Shield" program.

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November 14

Nadine Moubarak represents SKF at the 2024 QARIB Award ceremony, organized at the French Insitute in Amman, Jordan by CFI, with AFD support. November 14



SKF and the Atlantic Council's DFRLab co-publish a report titled "Pro-Hezbollah Accounts Orchestrated Digital Smear Campaign against Lebanese Journalists" by DFRLab's Ali Chemrose and SKF's Jad Hani and Jad Safwan, with support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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November 16-21

Randa Asmar represents SKF at the 2nd Spectators' Congress in Barcelona, Spain.

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November 20-22

Wael Akiki represents SKF at the European "Assises du journalisme" in Brussels.

November 21

Nayla Abdelnour presents the accomplishments of SKF's EJAF program at the seminar titled "Supporting Media in the Frontline of the War in Lebanon" held by EED in Brussels.

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November 21



SKF publishes a report titled "Online Incitement, Real-World Consequences for Journalists in Lebanon" by researcher Jad Hani, with support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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November 22-24

Ayman Mhanna attends the 2024 Halifax International Security Conference in Halifax, Canada and speaks on a panel titled "Building the New US strategy for Middle East Peace".

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December 18

Ayman Mhanna co-facilitates the GFMD Levant regional meeting on media support.

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December 26



SKF publishes a report titled "Targeting Hicham Haddad: Online Incitement Amid Lebanon's War Narratives" by InflueAnswers CEO Ralph Baydoun, with support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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Weaponizing the Narrative: Disinformation and Division



Throughout 2024, SKF conducted extensive investigations into the prevalent discourse and public sentiment across social networks, publishing analytical reports addressing digitally orchestrated disinformation and hate campaigns targeting journalists, artists, and activists. Patterns of digital manipulation, previously identified and exposed by SKF, have now solidified into a "new normal" within Lebanon's online environment. Our array into forensic analysis during 2024 has uncovered even deeper insights.

In the aftermath of the killing of a Lebanese political party member in April 2024, there was a dramatic surge in hate speech, disinformation, and incitements to violence, particularly on X (formerly Twitter). Political adversaries exploited the tragedy to inflame existing sectarian tensions. False narratives spread rapidly, featuring manipulated images, fabricated reports of kidnappings, and exaggerated claims of civil unrest. Anonymous accounts originating from various countries in the region contributed to these discussions, highlighting the coordinated and orchestrated nature of such campaigns.

Amplification Tactics and Implications

SKF identified six key narrative amplification tactics systematically used on X:

- Temporal clustering: Posts were concentrated within narrow time frames, aiming to rapidly amplify messages before counter-narratives emerged.
- Language and narrative alignment: Uniformity in language and recurring themes suggested premeditated coordination. Commonly used derogatory terms portrayed victims as threats, fueling hostility.
- High retweet ratios: Posts exhibited disproportionately high retweet rates, indicating artificial amplification.
- Network dynamics: High-profile accounts consistently amplified smaller, seemingly unrelated accounts, revealing hierarchical coordination.
- Use of automation: Regular posting intervals often indicative of automated bots – were detected, suggesting artificial engagement.
- Calls for offline violence: Explicit encouragement of offline retaliation directly linked digital campaigns to physical violence, demonstrating the dangerous potential of online hate speech to incite real-world harm.

Political Factions and Public Reactions

Beyond disinformation and amplification tactics, public responses to media controversies demonstrated the entrenched influence of political factions in Lebanon. Across several documented cases, political allegiances – particularly those involving Hezbollah – significantly shaped public discourse. Media controversies and personal incidents were routinely co-opted into broader political conflicts, reflecting Lebanon's deeply fragmented political and social fabric.

Hezbollah's prominence was especially pronounced in SKF's analysis, with the group repeatedly referenced due to its active involvement in orchestrating and amplifying hate campaigns. The party and its extensive online networks frequently initiated and sustained coordinated attacks, deliberately targeting journalists, activists, and public figures critical of its actions and policies. Both supporters and critics of Hezbollah actively engaged in these digital confrontations, underscoring the organization's pivotal and often detrimental role in shaping Lebanon's public discourse.

SKF's analysis also revealed how the intersection of sectarian politics and religious fanaticism provides fertile ground for the proliferation of hateful narratives and systematic disinformation. Media-related controversies in Lebanon are rarely isolated events; they symbolize deeper divides. Public reactions are often intensely politicized, morally judgmental, and dependent on the perceived alignment or opposition of individuals or media figures to specific political ideologies and Hezbollah's agenda in particular. Such dynamics vividly illustrate how Hezbollah and other political factions maintain considerable influence – often negative – over both online and offline public discourse.

Psychological Propaganda: Israeli Information Warfare

During the 2024 conflict with Israel, Israeli information warfare significantly shaped public sentiment and deepened divisions within Lebanon. Beginning with the escalation on September 23, 2024, Israeli propaganda pursued two primary goals: intelligence gathering and amplifying sectarian tensions among Lebanese communities.

A notable tactic involved direct data acquisition through platforms like Facebook and Instagram, targeting Hezbollah members and sympathizers with offers of safety in exchange for collaboration. Phishing attacks via WhatsApp and Telegram further compromised citizens' personal data, aiding intelligence operations. At the same time, Israeli forces used public broadcasts and live television footage to showcase their targeting of Hezbollah's operational infrastructure, aiming to intimidate the group's supporters and sow fear among the broader civilian population.

False narratives were disseminated via WhatsApp and social media, including fabricated claims that displaced individuals, particularly from southern Lebanon, were being denied shelter or aid due to their perceived political or sectarian affiliations. These campaigns explicitly aimed to deepen sectarian divisions. Additionally, false-flag impersonation campaigns on social media intentionally misrepresented political groups' actions, stoking hostility and confusion.

Israeli online disinformation tactics paralleled Hezbollah's methods, underscoring the broader trend of weaponizing information. Exploiting Lebanon's polarized political climate, these campaigns amplified internal divisions, manipulating narratives to inflame tensions.

Broader Implications

SKF's monitoring highlights the broader consequences of orchestrated disinformation and hate campaigns in digital spaces, particularly through:

- **Narrative control**: Coordinated messaging enables campaign orchestrators to shape public perception and suppress dissenting voices.
- **Echo chambers**: Effective amplification ensures messages reach targeted audiences, reinforcing existing biases and creating polarized echo chambers.
- **Escalation to offline violence**: Online campaigns frequently spill over into physical threats, intimidation, and violence against targeted individuals or groups.

Policymakers, social media platforms, and civil society organizations must urgently strengthen technical and policy mechanisms to detect and counter organized disinformation and hate speech campaigns.

Enhancing public media literacy to recognize and resist manipulation remains a critical priority. Additionally, multi-stakeholder discussions should be initiated to explore effective legal and regulatory frameworks for combating disinformation and hate speech, ensuring such approaches remain transparent, inclusive, and protective of fundamental freedoms.

Against All Odds: Strengthening Independent Media



Braving the Storm: Press Freedom in Times of War

The Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) has remained steadfast in its mission to support independent journalism and media resilience in the face of escalating challenges.

The war in Lebanon in 2024 has significantly impacted the press landscape, with journalists and media institutions facing direct threats, displacement, and operational disruptions. As violence spread, journalists found themselves not only reporting on the conflict but also becoming targets themselves, prompting urgent responses from SKF. The Foundation quickly adapted its programs to provide emergency assistance, ensuring that journalists covering the war had access to safety measures, relocation support, and financial aid. In a time when accurate and independent reporting is more critical than ever, SKF reinforced its commitment to protecting press freedom and amplifying the voices of those working on the frontlines.

Laying the Groundwork: Strengthening Sustainability

Despite the volatile environment, SKF continued its efforts to strengthen the sustainability of independent media. It facilitated crucial partnerships and mentorship programs, providing media outlets with tailored support in areas such as governance, human resources, strategic planning, and editorial innovation.

Additionally, SKF completed the third cohort of **the QARIB Media Incubator program**, backed by CFI and funded by the French Development Agency. In 2024, the Incubator supported six new independent media outlets – four of them from Lebanon¹ and two from Palestine² – by delivering targeted training on management, marketing, finance, and governance. Palestinian outlets also received specialized modules on editorial innovation and digital security.

Media grant programs remain a key pillar of SKF's work, addressing aspects of journalism focused on disinformation and factchecking, investigative reporting, and marginalized communities. SKF awarded six grants for investigative journalism in 2024 to four individual journalists and two media outlets³. Furthermore, SKF launched another two rounds of media grants in 2024, supporting eight media outlets⁴ in strengthening their capacity to address the rise in disinformation and their coverage of marginalized communities.

¹⁻ Awan Media, Badil, Naqd Media, and Scientia961.

²⁻ Shamaa TV and Untold Palestine.

³⁻ Nagd Media and The Public Source.

⁴⁻ Awan Media, Megaphone, Raseef22, Daraj Media, L'Orient-Le Jour, Nagd Media, Beirut Today, and Manateg.

Prioritizing Safety and Ensuring Legal Protection

Media safety also remained at the forefront of SKF's initiatives. In response to the increasing risks faced by journalists, the Foundation organized specialized training sessions covering journalist safety, digital security, and legal protections. Twelve outlets⁵ received tailored support on physical safety and journalist risk assessment, while eight outlets⁶ benefited from mental health support group sessions, recognizing the emotional toll of reporting in crisis and war settings. Additionally, two outlets⁷ received expert guidance on data analytics as well as on their X and Meta strategies to optimize their digital presence and audience engagement.

Workshops on **artificial intelligence in journalism** further equipped 21 media outlets with essential skills to navigate an evolving digital landscape, ensuring that independent journalists remain at the forefront of technological advancements. Through these efforts, SKF reinforced a culture of preparedness and resilience within Lebanon's independent media sector.

New Horizons: Innovating Revenue Streams for Independent Media

SKF has also prioritized long-term sustainability for independent media by fostering innovative, revenue-generating initiatives. Skroll Media, the independent news aggregator platform, continued its expansion, with 16 independent outlets⁸ joining, further enhancing media accessibility and exposure to wider audiences. This initiative represents a crucial step in strengthening public trust in independent, high-quality journalism.

Moreover, the Agency for Equality expanded its campaign portfolio in 2024, launching 23 new campaigns totaling approximately USD 49,500, and involving 12 media outlets from Jordan⁹, Tunisia¹⁰, and Lebanon¹¹. This effort provided valuable core income to independent media outlets while amplifying human rights and social justice causes. AE's initiatives this year helped 12 media outlets in Lebanon, Tunisia, and Jordan diversify their revenue sources beyond traditional donor funding, ensuring financial resilience in an increasingly challenging landscape.

The Last Line of Defense: Journalism Against All Odds

Amid mounting challenges, SKF remains vigilant in monitoring and combating violations and repression, ensuring that the pursuit of truth endures despite adversity. In an era where independent journalism is under siege, SKF's efforts provide journalists not only with survival tools but also with the means to continue holding power to account.

- 5- Anahon, Awan Media, Badil, Beirut Today, L'Orient-Le Jour, Manateq, Naqd Media, No2ta, The Feminist Lab, Raseef22, Silat Wassel, and Spot-Cast.
- 6- Anahon, L'Orient-Le Jour, Manateq, Naqd Media, Raseef22, Sharika Wa Laken, Silat Wassel, and The Public Source
- 7- Badil and Naqd Media.
- 8- Al-Khabar, Anahon, Awan Media, Badil, Beirut Today, Manateq, Megaphone, Raseef22, Sifr, Silat Wassel, Spot-Cast, Synaps, The Policy Initiative, and The Public Source.
- 9- Shezomedia, 7iber, and Sowt.
- 10- QLM, Nefzawa, and Blue TN.
- 11- Al Rawiya, Beirut Today, Naqd Media, Megaphone, No2ta, and Muwatin.

2024 brought immense challenges and threats to the sustainability and survival of independent media and journalism in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and the MENA region at large. Concerns about the new U.S. administration's termination or suspension of ongoing programs proved well-founded, with new sustainability challenges extending beyond media outlets to media support organizations and the entire independent media sphere.

Nevertheless, through direct interventions, strategic partnerships, and relentless advocacy, SKF will continue working to address the structural and political obstacles that undermine press freedom. Even as war and evolving forms of global censorship reshape the media landscape, SKF's commitment remains resolute: to empower those who risk everything to report the truth, ensuring that no attempt to silence independent voices will prevail.

Israel's War on Lebanon and the Systematic Targeting of Journalists



In the early days of the Israeli war on Lebanon that started with Hezbollah's intervention in the Gaza conflict, hostilities were concentrated in border areas. However, in September 2024, the Israeli army expanded its attacks to cover most of Lebanese territory, including the capital, Beirut. The airstrikes did not spare the civilian community, resulting in over 4,047 deaths and 16,638 injuries, according to the Lebanese Ministry of Health. Journalists and media crews were not spared either, but rather deliberately targeted by the Israeli army on multiple occasions, killing 11 journalists and photographers and injuring dozens. Some narrowly survived random bombardments, while several media buildings and offices were destroyed.

During the war, media crews worked under exceptionally difficult circumstances. Many were forced to flee their homes due to intense bombardment, leaving journalists and photographers under psychological strain and financial burdens as they sought safe shelter for their families. At the same time, they operated under dangerous security conditions, facing severe risks. The media sector also suffered from a lack of professional safety training for war reporting and a shortage of protective gear such as helmets and bulletproof vests.

Moreover, journalists faced continued threats and attacks for their opinions, especially those criticizing Hezbollah's involvement in the war. Security and judicial authorities continued to summon journalists for questioning regarding their work or political views. This occurred alongside a significant rise in hate speech on social media, with widespread incitement and accusations of treason against those who spoke out against the war and its consequences on Lebanon.

Repeated Israeli Crimes Against Lebanese Media

Journalists killed by the Israeli army in 2024:

- Hadi al-Sayyed (Al-Mayadeen Online)
- Kamel Karaki (former Al-Manar videographer)
- Mohammad Ghadbon (freelance photographer)
- Wissam Qassem (Al-Manar videographer)
- Ghassan Najjar and technician Mohammad Reda (Al-Mayadeen)
- Zeinab Ghosn (freelance journalist) and her family
- Soukaina Mansour Kawtharani (Al-Nour Radio)
- Ali Al-Hadi Yassin (Al-Manar videographer)
- Hussein Safa (Hawana Lebanon news site)
- Mohammad Bitar (photographer)

Some of those journalists were killed while reporting, while others died in airstrikes on their homes or were deliberately targeted in their places of residence without warning, such as in the assassination of journalists in Hasbaya on October 25, 2024. Family members of journalists were also killed in these attacks, including Samir Ayoub and Sakina Kawtharani, who was killed alongside her two children. Several others were wounded in airstrikes or by live gunfire, including journalist Abdul Kader Albay, reporter Yumna Fawaz, and photographers Mohamed Al-Zaatari, Hassan Hoteit, and Zakaria Fadel, whose equipment and vehicles were also destroyed.

Some journalists narrowly survived Israeli strikes in southern Lebanon and Beirut's southern suburbs, including local and international reporters such as: Nakhlé Odaymi (MTV), Nahed Youssef (Al-Arabiya), Issam Mawassi (Al Jazeera), Reef Aqil (Al-Jadeed), and the Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet crew, including journalist Magnus Falkehed and photographer Jerker Ivarsson.

Israeli warplanes also targeted and destroyed media buildings, including Al-Sirat TV headquarters, the old Al-Manar studios in Beirut's southern suburb, Al-Mayadeen's office in Jnah, and Taha TV, a children's media network

Internal Attacks Against Journalists

The war had serious domestic repercussions on press freedom and journalists' safety, with increasing harassment and attacks on both local and foreign media personnel covering the war. Journalists faced physical assaults, gunfire, obstruction of their work, confiscation or destruction of their equipment, and deletion of their recordings. Some were detained and interrogated by Hezbollah and Amal Movement supporters or even ordinary citizens, particularly in areas under Hezbollah's control in southern Lebanon and Beirut's southern suburbs.

As a result, many journalists avoided working in certain areas to prevent confrontations with armed groups and their supporters. More concerning was that some journalists refrained from reporting attacks against them for fear of retaliation.

The most severe violations were directed at media outlets that opposed Hezbollah's political stance. These attacks were closely linked to incitement campaigns by Hezbollah's online networks, which targeted journalists critical of the party's involvement in the war. Accusations of treason and espionage were widely used to intimidate dissenting voices and enforce a single narrative aligned with Hezbollah and its allies.

Legal Persecution and Censorship of Journalists

As hate speech and incitement campaigns against journalists intensified, security and judicial authorities failed to hold perpetrators accountable. Instead, repressive measures focused on prosecuting journalists for expressing opinions on social media or for their reporting.

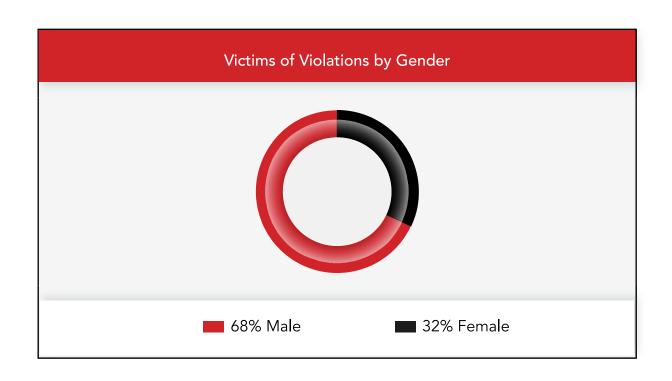
No concrete changes were observed on what has been a chronic and intentional misuse of judicial power against journalists, as they (journalists) continued to be summoned for questioning by non-competent authorities such as the Cybercrime and Intellectual Property Bureau, the Criminal Investigation Department, and State Security, in violation of press laws. This practice has been based on existing legal provisions related to defamation and libel. These provisions offer no apparent limitations, do not explicitly exclude journalistic and investigative content, and therefore offer an "over the counter" excuse, particularly for politicians and public officials, to use against journalists that investigate their performance. Furthermore, the total number of violations against journalists in Lebanon, from Lebanese state and non-state actors, increased by 23% in 2024.

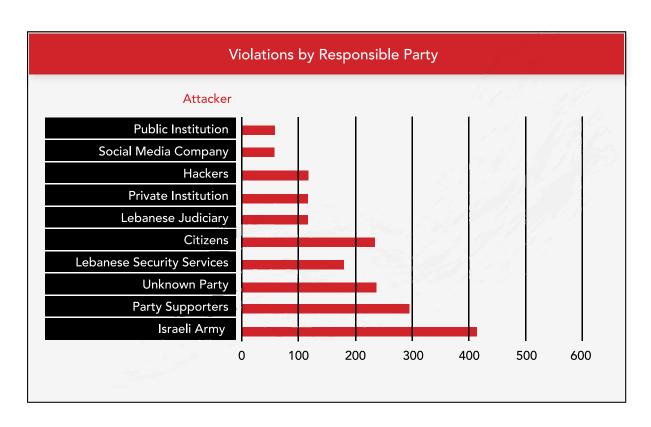
Despite this, some journalists insisted on their legal right to refuse questioning by unauthorized security agencies, demanding that any legal proceedings be limited to the Publications Court or investigative judges.

A Harsh Year for Lebanese Journalism

The past year was one of the most difficult for Lebanese journalists covering the Israeli war on Lebanon. They faced physical dangers, psychological stress, and ethical dilemmas, with some paying the ultimate price for reporting Israeli crimes against Lebanese civilians. Most importantly, the challenges faced during this conflict highlight the urgent need for all stakeholders to review policies and implement stronger protection measures for journalists and their rights.

Violations	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Arrest							1			1		1	3
Ban on publication/ distribution/broadcast											1		1
Banned movies/plays/ songs		1											1
Building break-in/ Attack against building										3	3	1	7
Confiscation of equipment							1				4	1	6
Damage to equipment										1	2		3
Defamation and hate speech		1	1	4	1	3		2	1	2	4	1	20
Destruction of journalists' homes											1		1
Hacking	1			1					1	2			5
Interrogation under pressure			1	2			1			1	1	5	11
Job obstruction					2	1	2			7	4		16
Killing									2	4	1		7
Lawsuit	2	1		1	2	1				1	3	1	12
Physical assault/Injuries				2		1	2	3		8	7	1	24
Summons	1		2	1				1			2	2	9
Targeting journalists' families									1				1
Threat				2	1		1		1	8	4		17
Travel/entry ban				1			1						2
Total	4	3	4	14	6	6	9	6	6	38	37	13	146





What's Next for Syria after Assad?



On the morning of Sunday, December 8, 2024, the Syrian people finally overthrew the Assad regime, bringing an end to decades of oppressive rule. The genocidal prison state collapsed, and the regime's killing machine was dismantled.

These words alone may suffice to capture a moment Syrians had awaited for thirteen harrowing years. Since the Syrian revolution began in March 2011, the Assad regime systematically exterminated opponents using every weapon available. The bloodshed led dozens of officers and hundreds of soldiers to defect from an army that had become Assad's sword against his own people. By the end of 2011, the Free Syrian Army was formed. The following year, Assad intensified the sectarian character of his war, culminating in the brutal Houla massacre on May 25, 2012. Violence spread rapidly, marked by atrocities such as the regime's chemical attack on Eastern Ghouta on August 21, 2013, which altered the course of the war dramatically.

The conflict's complexity deepened with the emergence of extremist, Salafist, and jihadist groups such as *Jabhat al-Nusra* (then affiliated with Al-Qaeda) under the shadowy leadership of Abu Mohammad al-Julani, and the establishment of Kurdish-controlled autonomous areas in Hasakah. By late 2013, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged, rivalling Assad's regime in brutality, seizing large swaths of territory including Raqqa. This development led to an international mobilization against ISIS and the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by a U.S.-led global coalition. Concurrently, Russia and Iran intervened militarily to support Assad, turning Syria into a battleground for geopolitical rivalries, at an enormous human cost – especially for civilians and journalists targeted by assassinations, bombings, and executions. By late 2016, opposition-held Aleppo fell to regime forces.

The Collapse of Assad's Regime

Opposition forces gradually lost territory in Eastern Ghouta, northern Hama, and other regions, retreating primarily to Idlib and northern Aleppo, where *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) – formerly *Jabhat al-Nusra* – and Turkish-backed groups maintained control. Syria became effectively divided among four distinct administrations: the Assad government, the opposition's interim government, Kurdish self-administration in the northeast, and HTS's so-called "Salvation Government" in Idlib.

This stalemate persisted until the devastating February 6, 2023, earthquake, prompting humanitarian interventions and controversial normalization efforts with Assad's regime. Assad even attended the Arab League summit in Riyadh and falsely promised to crackdown on drug production and trade in Syria, and Italy reopened its embassy in Damascus. After Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023, international attention shifted entirely toward Palestine-Israel, leaving Syria largely forgotten. Analysts predicted Assad's international rehabilitation was imminent.

However, on November 27, 2024, opposition forces unexpectedly launched "Operation Deterrence of Aggression," exploiting Assad's weakened position due to the reduced presence of Iranian militias, Hezbollah's focus on the war with Israel, and Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine. Within days, opposition forces captured Aleppo (November 29), Hama (December 5), and finally Damascus itself in the early hours of December 8, marking the fall of Assad's regime and the collapse of what people thought was an "eternal rule."

After years of revolution, war, and regional conflict on Syrian soil, the urgent question of transitional justice remains. Thousands remain forcibly disappeared, tens of thousands have died, and countless perpetrators of atrocities remain free. Syria today faces ruined infrastructure, economic devastation, and no clear plans for immediate recovery, largely due to the unexpected and rapid collapse of the regime. The critical question now is: Where is Syria headed?

Security and Military Challenges

Attempting to answer without clear data remains speculative. Initial signs of political stability are emerging, as international organizations and UN agencies operate freely in Damascus. However, economically, the catastrophe endures: nine out of ten Syrians live in poverty, unemployment has surged, and the dissolution of regime military and security institutions has created thousands of jobless men; many of whom have taken up arms, threatening the fragile peace, particularly in mixed sectarian regions along Syria's coast and in rural Homs and Hama.

Security tensions coincide with media campaigns and incitement against the new government, particularly on social media. Reconciliation committees, such as the "Community Peace Initiative," formed in Homs, Latakia, and Hama, urging communities to accept the new reality and avoid further violence. Yet some committees have unintentionally complicated matters by spreading misleading narratives. In mixed regions, former opposition supporters formed armed units to track down known regime perpetrators, later merging with the newly established General Security Forces.

The new administration launched extensive security operations to control chaos, successfully thwarting significant attacks, such as an attempted bombing of the Sayyida Zainab shrine. However, crime remains rampant, archaeological looting has surged, and poverty continues to rise. Facing personnel shortages, the government reintegrated defected police officers to bolster law enforcement.

On the military front, efforts to integrate former opposition factions into the reconstituted Syrian army have advanced, dissolving even major groups like *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*. However, factions in southern Syria demanded independent brigades within the army structure. Meanwhile, negotiations with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued, complicated by the uncertain future of U.S. forces in the northeast. Eventually, by the publication of this report, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) had agreed to full integration into Syria's formal institutions.

Yet suspicion remains widespread; factions remain armed and cautious, particularly amid ongoing skirmishes between Turkish-backed forces and the SDF.

Navigating Political Pluralism and Media Freedoms

Politically, preparations for a National Dialogue Conference sparked lively debate over participant selection and decision-making mechanisms. This debate signals a gradual recovery from decades of fear under Assad, although confusion persists, especially in former regime-controlled areas. Many Syrians there remain influenced by years of regime propaganda.

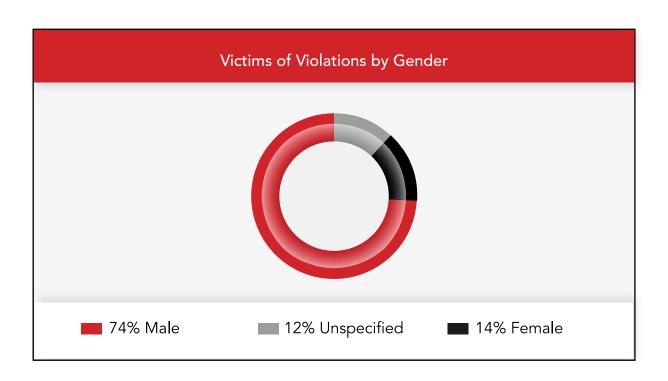
On the media front, the new Ministry of Information has promised broad press freedoms, inviting former state media employees to return and pledging accountability for regime-affiliated war correspondents. International media have resumed operations largely unhindered, and independent journalists have obtained unprecedented access to previously restricted areas, including security branches and prisons.

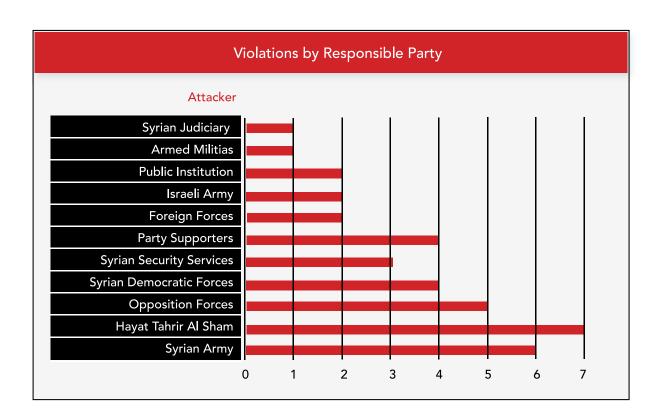
These new freedoms have sparked debate. While some defend unrestricted media access, others demand accountability, opposing media efforts that might rehabilitate former regime figures or violate ethical standards, such as journalists entering crime scenes or participating in exhumations. The government has so far avoided decisive actions, wary of accusations of censorship, even though violations typically involve pro-government activists.

Today, Damascus and Syria buzz with political debate, performances, student protests, and demonstrations. On social media and in public discourse, freedom has become a reality, with even sensitive topics like military integration and government appointments openly criticized. So far, arrests for expressing opinions or participating in peaceful demonstrations have remained anecdotal.

Will this newfound freedom endure, and how can it be sustained? The answer lies not only in the new legal frameworks and constitution soon to be developed, but more fundamentally in fostering a vibrant, resilient, and protective political, cultural, and media landscape that safeguards these freedoms for future generations.

Violations	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Physical assault/Injuries			5	1							2		8
Lawsuit		1											1
Confiscation of Equipment				1									1
Killing		1						1		1	1	5	9
Job Obstruction	4												4
Threat												1	1
Arrest	1		1	2		3		2	1	2			12
Suspension/Closure of a media outlet				1									1
Banned movies/plays songs										1			1
Total	5	2	6	5	0	3	0	3	1	4	3	6	38





Palestine's Endless Battle for Existence



Journalists in Gaza: Surviving to Report

Israel's war on Gaza continued throughout 2024, with relentless killing and devastation. Over 21,000 residents were killed during the year, including approximately 13,000 women, children, and elderly people. By the end of the year, the number of injured had surpassed 108,000, and official estimates indicated Gaza's population had declined by 6% due to Israel's campaign of extermination. Among the victims were hundreds of families erased entirely from civil records after Israeli airstrikes destroyed their homes with them inside. Approximately 1.9 million Gazans became displaced due to sustained bombing, and the United Nations estimated that 91% of Gaza's residents face severe food insecurity.

The ongoing war also took a heavy toll on journalists, artists, and intellectuals. In 2024 alone, 118 journalists and photographers were killed by Israeli forces – some while reporting from conflict zones, others while at home with their families. On multiple occasions, the Israeli army openly admitted to deliberately targeting journalists, accusing them of affiliations with Palestinian armed factions. Notable cases included the deaths of Al Jazeera journalist Hamza Dahdouh and photographer Mustafa Abu Thuraya in January, and Al Jazeera correspondent Ismail Al-Ghoul and his cameraman Rami Al-Rifi in July. In another tragic incident, five journalists from Al-Quds Al-Youm TV were killed in a drone strike on their broadcast vehicle in the Nuseirat refugee camp.

In addition to those killed, dozens of journalists suffered injuries that worsened due to the collapse of medical infrastructure. Israeli forces also systematically arrested journalists and photographers from their homes, evacuation centers, displacement shelters, and military checkpoints. While many were eventually released, around 25 journalists remained detained by year's end.

The Israeli army intensified its systematic destruction of media institutions, demolishing 21 local radio stations, 15 news agencies, and six local newspapers. Additionally, more than 30 cultural institutions were destroyed, including 12 museums and approximately 200 historical buildings.

Assassinating journalists in the field, killing them in their homes, destroying media institutions, fabricating allegations, orchestrating incitement campaigns, and conducting arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances formed part of Israel's deliberate strategy to suppress reporting from Gaza. Journalists also faced continuous displacement, chronic power outages, internet disruptions, shortages of food and medical supplies, and social stigma, as civilians grew fearful of renting to journalists due to the risk of airstrikes. All these conditions significantly compounded the psychological trauma faced by media professionals.

Ink in the Crossfire: Journalists in the West Bank Between Guns and Gags

Palestinian journalists in the West Bank ended 2024 amid severe violations perpetrated by both Israeli forces and the Palestinian Authority, painting a bleak picture of ever-shrinking press freedoms.

Israeli military raids, particularly in northern West Bank cities and refugee camps, created an extremely hazardous environment for media crews. Even strict adherence to safety measures offered little protection from live ammunition, rubber-coated bullets, and deliberate vehicular attacks. Every raid saw journalists facing gunfire, stun grenades, tear gas, physical assaults, destruction of equipment, forced deletion of footage, arrests, or detention; all aimed explicitly at obstructing journalistic coverage.

A disturbing new tactic emerged in 2024, with Israeli military vehicles deliberately chasing and attempting to run over journalists during field coverage. Military checkpoints became traps for journalists, with several subjected to repeated administrative detention without charge or trial – conditions human rights organizations condemned as inhumane. Israeli forces established around 900 checkpoints across the West Bank, significantly restricting journalists' mobility and impeding timely reporting.

Israel intensified its crackdown on Al Jazeera, banning the channel within Israel and forcibly closing its offices in Ramallah, confiscating equipment and documents under allegations of "incitement and supporting terrorism," despite Ramallah's designation under the Oslo Accords as Area A – an area supposedly under full Palestinian administrative control.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority continued detaining and summoning journalists without clear charges or on fabricated allegations, often claiming "weapons possession," despite interrogations centering solely on their journalistic work.

Clashes between Palestinian security forces and armed residents in Jenin refugee camp further intensified media repression. Tensions peaked when journalist Shatha Al-Sabbagh was fatally shot in the head during confrontations, with each side blaming the other. In reaction, Fatah banned Al Jazeera's operations across six governorates due to its coverage, while Palestinian security forces enforced a media blackout in Jenin by obstructing reporting.

Incitement Charges and the "Al Jazeera Law": Targeting Palestinian Journalists in Israel

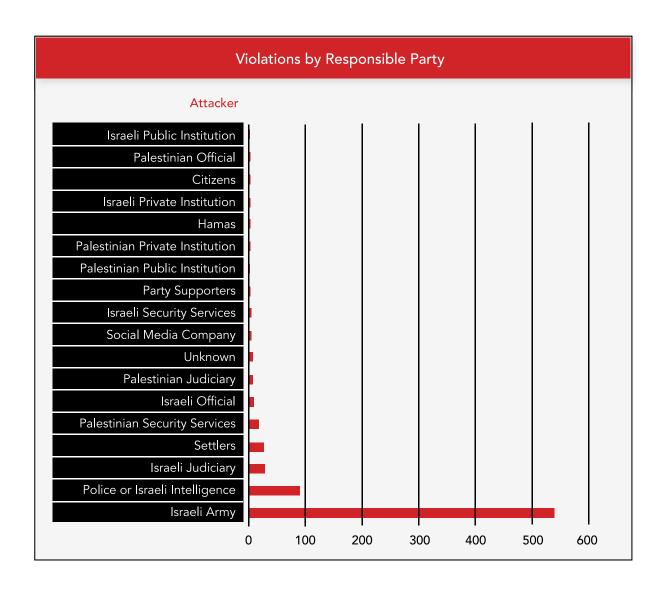
In the 1948 territories, Israeli police, Border Guard units, and military forces repeatedly assaulted Palestinian journalists through beatings, arbitrary arrests, equipment confiscations, and coverage bans, especially during solidarity demonstrations supporting Gaza. Journalists also became targets of settler-led incitement campaigns advocating for their arrest, expulsion, or even assassination due to social media posts critical of Israel's actions.

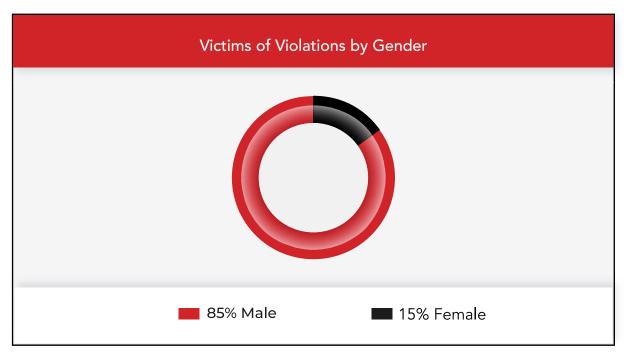
Israeli courts aggressively employed "incitement" charges against Palestinian journalists, photographers, and artists expressing solidarity with Gaza or opposing the war online. Some received prison sentences, while others endured lengthy house arrests after detention. Simultaneously, Palestinian journalists faced intensified online incitement and threats from settlers and even Israeli journalists themselves.

In April 2024, Israel enacted the "Al Jazeera Law," authorizing the Prime Minister and Minister of Communications to ban foreign media perceived as "threatening Israel's security." Under this legislation, Israel shuttered the offices of Al-Mayadeen and Al Jazeera within its borders, further targeting Arabic-language and Palestinian-focused media.

Suppression extended beyond journalism to Palestinian cultural expression. Film screenings, performances, and cultural events in Jerusalem, Haifa, and Jaffa were banned, with organizers frequently interrogated. Palestinian cultural activities increasingly faced cancellations justified by vague "security concerns," particularly if they emphasized Palestinian identity or highlighted the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza.

Violations	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Physical assault/Injuries	22	20	21	11	11	22	21	29	20	15	14	12	218
Targeting journalists' damilies	11	11	5	2	3		4					3	39
Interrogation under pressure	3	2			1			2	1	4	3		16
Lawsuit			4	2					1		3	1	11
Confiscation of equipment	1	1			2	1		1	3	3			12
Killing	21	13	11	5	6	5	21	10	4	18	13	14	141
Job obstruction	5	5	2	11	11	18	3	46	42	11	10	19	183
Destruction of journalists' homes	3	6	5	2	6		1	1			1	2	27
Prison sentence	1	1	3	2	1	1	1		2		2		14
Summons				1	1	1		1				2	6
Building break-in/ Attack against building	14	7	5	1				2	4	1			34
Detention	9	5	10	6	5	3	2	7	1	6	3	7	64
Torture	2		6										8
Damage to equipment	1	1			3			10	1				16
Threat	11	2		4	3	2		8	30	10		4	74
Arrest	4	8	27	3	4	2	2	3	3	12	1	6	75
Page/website shutdown			1							1	1		3
Journalists' disappearance	1	1	1						1				4
Suspension/closure of a media outlet		1			1	1			2				5
Banned movies/plays/ songs								2					2
Fine				1					1				2
Defamation and hate speech		1	1			1	1	2		8			14
Abduction			1										1
Ban on publication/ distribution/broadcast				1				1	5	1		5	13
Arbitrary dismissal							1						1
Deleted scenes										3	3		6
Travel/entry ban												1	1
Total	109	85	103	52	58	57	57	125	121	93	54	76	990





Echoes of Gaza, Silence in Jordan



In 2024, media freedom in Jordan paid a heavy price amid Israel's prolonged war on Gaza, facing both usual pressures and surprising challenges from unexpected quarters.

The repercussions for media professionals opposing the genocidal war on Gaza took various forms, some extremely covert and challenging to detect through our monitoring tools. Many restrictions occurred quietly, implemented "under the table," and were rarely documented or made visible.

Limitations on media freedom have long been an unfortunate reality in Jordan. However, what is especially alarming now is how these restrictions have evolved, silencing Jordanian journalists for defending what is undeniably a humanitarian cause. Few could have anticipated that speaking up against a humanitarian catastrophe would result in harsh crackdowns.

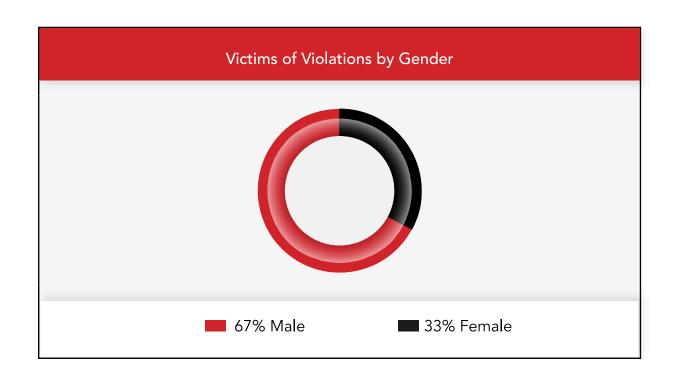
Journalists endured arrests, imprisonment, arbitrary detention, summons, threats of deportation, bans on websites and social media accounts, closures of online and satellite channels, and even prohibitions on entry into Jordan. One notable case in 2024 involved journalist Heba Abu Taha, who received a one-year prison sentence for an opinion piece criticizing Jordan's interception of Iranian missiles intended for Israel, over Jordanian airspace.

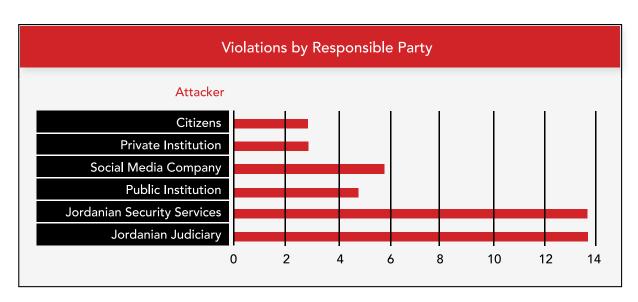
Among these varying degrees of severity, arrests stood out as the most punitive measure against journalists advocating for Gaza's suffering population. Numerous journalists faced detention, including Kheireddeen Al-Jabari from Arabi Post, who was arrested by security forces during a protest near the Israeli embassy in Amman before eventually being released on bail. Another high-profile case was that of Ahmad Hassan Al-Zoubi, publisher of the Sawaleif website, sentenced to one year in prison due to a 2022 social media post supporting truck drivers' strikes in southern Jordan. Efforts to replace his imprisonment with community service repeatedly failed.

Particularly disturbing was the extensive censorship imposed by Meta, whose aggressive actions significantly curtailed media freedom in Jordan. The war in Gaza laid bare the enormous influence of digital platforms over journalistic content, as Meta repeatedly blocked, restricted, and threatened closure of Jordanian news pages and accounts merely for covering events related to the conflict.

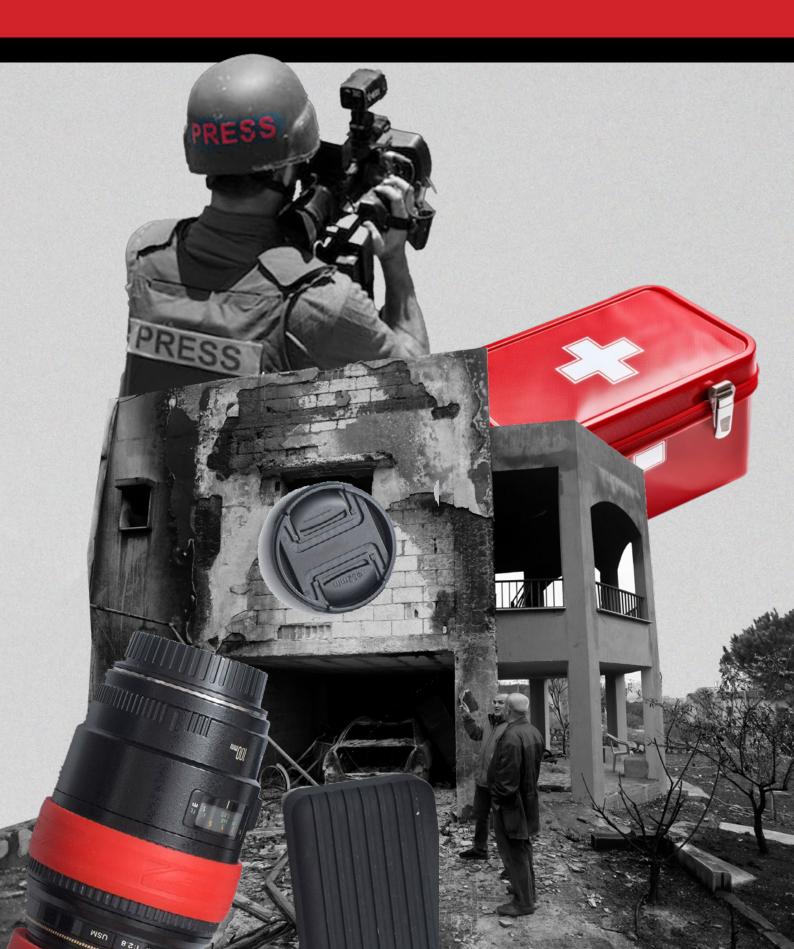
Jordanian journalists have long been forced to cope with "familiar" violations of press freedom; something they have navigated for decades. Yet, confronting new forms of censorship facilitated by powerful, borderless platforms adds an extra level of difficulty. Coping, however, is not surrender or a sign of weakness; rather, it acknowledges the necessity of adapting new strategies and modern tools to effectively defend press freedom in an increasingly challenging media environment.

Violations	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Physical assault/Injuries					1								1
Interrogation under pressure				1	1								2
Lawsuit				3			1		2				6
Confiscation of equipment					1								1
Job obstruction				1					1	1			3
Prison sentence		1			2	3	1						7
Summons				2	1								3
Building break-In/ Attack against building				1									1
Detention				3	4	1							8
Threat		1											1
Arrest			3				1			1			5
Page/website shutdown	2	1							1				4
Suspension/closure of a media outlet					1								1
Banned movies/plays/ songs											1		1
Fine		1								1			2
Defamation and hate speech								1				1	2
Ban on publication/ distribution/broadcast								1				1	2
Arbitrary dismissal										1			1
Total	2	4	3	11	11	4	3	2	4	4	1	2	61





Emergency Journalists' Assistance Fund



Between September 23 and November 27, 2024, the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah escalated dramatically, forcing over one million residents from South Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley, and Beirut's southern suburbs to flee their homes. Journalists also faced severe consequences, including displacement and shortages of critical resources such as medical insurance. Many experienced significant psychological distress due to trauma from airstrikes and sudden evacuations, resulting in heightened anxiety, insecurity, and feelings of helplessness.

Responding to these urgent needs, the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) launched the Emergency Journalists' Assistance Fund (EJAF) in late September 2024. The initiative provided targeted support to journalists directly affected by the escalating conflict, offering aid in four primary areas:

- Housing assistance: Immediate accommodation support for journalists who had evacuated or lost their homes, prioritizing those in public shelters, overcrowded housing, or struggling to pay increased rent costs.
- Medical support: Assistance for injured and uninsured journalists, including freelancers, ensuring access to follow-up care, physiotherapy, prosthetics, and essential medication.
- **Trauma and psychological support:** Provision of access to professional mental health services to journalists coping with conflict-related trauma.
- **Equipment replacement:** Replacement of essential professional tools such as laptops, cameras, and other media equipment lost or damaged during the conflict.

SKF collaborated closely with several local and international partners to maximize the impact and efficiency of the assistance provided, including: the Alternative Press Syndicate, the Lebanese Photojournalists' Union, Reporters Without Borders, and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

These partnerships facilitated the rapid identification of affected journalists, accurate needs assessments, coordinated aid delivery, and prevented duplication of efforts. The initiative emphasized transparency, rigorous verification processes, and efficient resource allocation to ensure support reached those most in need.

To date, the fund has supported 87 journalists (60 men and 27 women), with housing emerging as the most urgent priority. Of these journalists, 75 required immediate shelter assistance.

Through EJAF, SKF has effectively addressed the urgent humanitarian and professional needs of journalists impacted by the war in Lebanon, enabling them to maintain their safety, dignity, and crucial reporting work. SKF remains committed to expanding these efforts and securing additional resources to sustain and strengthen this vital initiative amidst ongoing challenges. challenges. EJAF would not have been possible without the support of AFD, CFI, CPJ, ERIM, FPU, IMS, MDI, NED, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UNESCO, and dozens of generous individual donors.

2024 Samir Kassir Award for Freedom of the Press



The 19th edition of the Samir Kassir Award for Freedom of the Press took place amid escalating violence in Palestine and Lebanon, alongside a troubling increase in the deliberate targeting of journalists.

Founded as a testament to unwavering commitment to press freedom, the Samir Kassir Award has grown into one of the region's most prestigious recognitions for journalism focused on democracy, human rights, good governance, and civic engagement. Over the years, it has also amplified the voices of courageous women journalists, who frequently endure heightened harassment and intimidation compared to their male counterparts. In 2024, the Award reaffirmed its critical role as a beacon of press freedom in a region where journalism remains under severe threat. By providing a platform for courageous reporters, the Samir Kassir Award continues to inspire and empower those who risk their lives to uphold truth and accountability.

This year's edition was particularly poignant, marking the first ceremony held without Gisèle Khoury, the late founder and president of the Samir Kassir Foundaiton. Her absence was deeply felt, and the event served as a moment of remembrance and tribute for all who knew and admired her.

On February 15, 2024, the European Union (EU) Delegation to Lebanon and SKF officially launched the call for submissions. In the following weeks, SKF organized a series of insightful interviews with experts, representatives from the EU Delegation in Lebanon, and past jury members and winners, providing deeper reflections on media challenges and emphasizing the Award's ongoing significance.

Layal Jebran, a technology and security specialist, was this year's featured expert. Over three dedicated sessions, she explored the risks and opportunities posed by artificial intelligence (AI) in journalism, especially its implications for credibility. She highlighted the growing threats posed by deepfakes and misinformation, while also discussing the potential benefits of AI in data collection, verification, and reporting accuracy.

Several former jury members, themselves prominent journalists, contributed their analyses on the state of press freedom in Lebanon and the wider region: Veteran journalist and scholar Nora Boustany emphasized the critical role regional journalists play in shaping public discourse and advocating for press freedom. Former BBC Arabic Bureau Chief Nada Abdel Samad reflected on the evolving landscape of journalism and the intensifying challenges faced by media professionals today. Ammar Abd Rabbo, a renowned photojournalist, celebrated the Award's legacy and its contribution to protecting freedom of expression. Columnnist Rami Khouri underscored the indispensable role journalists play in resisting autocracy and oppression, especially during periods of heightened censorship across the Arab world.

Former Award winners, including Asaad Zalzali (Iraq) and Roger Asfar (Syria), shared personal reflections on how winning the Award significantly impacted their careers.

The 2024 edition attracted submissions from a record number of 354 journalists across the region, including from Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. Participants competed across three categories: Opinion piece, investigative article, and audiovisual news report.

For the fifth consecutive year, the Students' Prize was also awarded, selected by a jury composed entirely of students.

The award ceremony took place on June 5, 2024, at the Sursock Palace Gardens, closely aligning with the anniversary of Samir Kassir's assassination on June 2, 2005, in Beirut.

The winners of the Samir Kassir Award in 2024 were:

- Opinion Article: <u>Abdelrahman El Gendy</u> (Egypt)
- Investigative Article: <u>Hadeel Arja</u> (Syria)
- Audiovisual News Report: <u>Aseel Sariah</u> (Yemen)
- Students' Prize: Mohammed Abu Shahma (Palestine)



BEIRUT SPRING FESTIVAL





Tribute to Gisèle Khoury



Concert for Palestine





Mute -



Zyara, Season 8

Amid challenging socioeconomic conditions and a fragmented political landscape, it remains crucial to acknowledge and celebrate the efforts of Lebanese civil society and non-governmental institutions that strive to nurture and sustain cultural life.

In times of crisis, culture often becomes sidelined, transforming into a privilege accessible only to the few. However, numerous dedicated artists and cultural advocates tirelessly fight to ensure that culture does not devolve into an elitist luxury, instead championing the principle of "culture by all and for all." In response, festivals and cultural events have increasingly adapted to socioeconomic constraints, either waiving entrance fees or significantly reducing them.

Free admission has always been a cornerstone of the Beirut Spring Festival (BSF) – a principle that the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) has consistently upheld since the festival's inception. The BSF embodies Samir Kassir's vision of Beirut as a vibrant cultural hub within the Arab world. Its primary goal remains unwavering: to offer joyful, entertaining, and enriching cultural experiences free of charge to audiences across Beirut and all of Lebanon. BSF thus exemplifies SKF's enduring commitment to democratizing access to culture.

In its 16th edition, the Beirut Spring Festival honored its late founder, Gisèle Khoury, with an exceptional program comprising four performances held over five evenings across three venues. The festival featured, on May 30, an open-air screening in Martyrs' Square in Beirut's city center, presenting the award-winning documentary series **Zyara**, which celebrated Beirut through the eyes of 12 renowned Lebanese artists. Faek Homaissi, Georgette Gebara, Harout Fazlian, Mireille Maalouf, Nicolas Daniel, Oumeima Khalil, Randa Asmar, Randa Kaady, Rifaat Torbey, Roger Assaf, Takla Chamoun, and Ziad Ahmadieh each painted their personal, deeply moving portraits of Beirut through a series of heartwarming, and at times melancholic, five-minute testimonials. Over 900 attendees gathered for this memorable screening.

MUTE by Suleiman Al Bassam

Tournesol Theatre, June 9 and 10, 2024

MUTE, a critically acclaimed and award-winning play by writer and director Sulayman Al-Bassam, explored the profound aftermath of the catastrophic Beirut port explosion on August 4, 2020, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history. In two sold-out performances at Tournesol Theatre, MUTE poignantly addressed the social and psychological consequences of marginalizing entire populations.

The Beirut Port explosion is a defining moment between two times, as Lebanon before and after.

Al-Bassam describes the play as a meditation on artistic resistance in the face of escalating violence and unprecedented media misinformation. He reflects: "What might we uncover if we abandoned traditional narrative techniques and instead embraced silence as an act of resistance? This performance is, in essence, a love letter to the resilient city of Beirut."

A Musical Tribute to Gaza, Palestine, and the Palestinian People

Al Madina Theatre, June 15, 2024

Palestine was strongly present at the Beirut Spring Festival through a powerful performance by renowned composer, singer, and writer Ziyad Sahhab, accompanied by Rafic Abboud. Sahhab, known for blending Bossa Nova and Salsa with oriental music, led a vibrant oriental orchestra during a full-house evening at Al Madina Theatre, offering a moving tribute to Gaza and the Palestinian people.

A Tribute to Gisèle Khoury by Issam Boukhaled

Tournesol Theatre, June 20, 2024

Gisèle Khoury was a celebrated Lebanese journalist whose illustrious career began in 1986 at LBCI, where she hosted cultural talk shows. From 1992 to 2001, she anchored *Hiwar al-Omr*, LBCI's prominent political talk show, interviewing leading political and cultural figures across the Arab world. She joined MBC in 2002 and played a key role in launching Al-Arabiya, hosting a weekly political show from 2003 to 2013. In October 2013, Khoury moved to BBC Arabic, conducting weekly interviews with global leaders, and from 2021 hosted a prime-time political show on Sky News Arabic.

Married to journalist Samir Kassir, who was assassinated on June 2, 2005, Gisèle Khoury founded the Samir Kassir Foundation in February 2006 to honor his legacy. Today, SKF remains one of the region's foremost NGOs advocating for media freedoms and freedom of expression.

Playwright and director Issam Boukhaled, together with actress Bernadette Houdeib, staged a moving performance celebrating the personal and professional legacy of Gisèle Khoury and Samir Kassir. This timely and cherished tribute honored a couple whose lives inspired countless journalists, artists, and politicians dedicated to liberty and freedom of expression.

Collaboration with Saint Joseph University: "A Reader and a Creator"

As part of its ongoing cultural mission, SKF also co-sponsored the inaugural edition of "A Reader and a Creator", a literary competition organized by the literature department at Saint Joseph University (USJ) in Beirut. The competition targeted students from public high schools, encouraging them to explore the works of prominent Lebanese writers while nurturing their own writing talents. The first edition was dedicated to novelist Aalawiya Sobh.

Two students were selected by a jury composed of academics and journalists, receiving awards for Best Writing and Best Analysis. SKF will continue its collaboration with USJ in 2025, dedicating the next edition of the competition to novelist Hassan Daoud.

Conclusion: Safeguarding Journalism in a Shifting World



As we close the chapter on 2024, it is impossible to overlook the alarming deterioration in freedom of expression and media freedoms across the broader MENA region. The disturbing escalation of violence against journalists, exemplified tragically by the unprecedented targeting of media workers in Gaza, Lebanon, and the West Bank, underscores the gravity of the threat facing independent journalism today.

Yet, the year also reaffirmed journalism's indispensable role. Amid conflict, repression, and uncertainty, brave journalists continued to risk their lives, reporting truthfully on issues of democracy, human rights, governance, and accountability. Their resilience under pressure remains the cornerstone of any functioning society. In this spirit, SKF intensified its efforts, developing innovative approaches, rapid-response mechanisms, and sustainable solutions that ensure journalism not only survives but thrives in the face of relentless threats.

The Challenges Ahead

Looking forward, the media landscape remains deeply unsettled, shaped by shifting geopolitical dynamics, volatile financial environments, and the growing weaponization of information technologies. Several critical challenges lie ahead, starting with geopolitical instability. The continued conflict in Palestine and the unresolved situations in Lebanon and Syria pose direct threats to journalists' physical safety. The climate of impunity around violence against journalists further exacerbates the risks they face.

Additionally, online disinformation, hate speech, and systematic propaganda campaigns have evolved into sophisticated operations, effectively polarizing societies, weakening public trust in independent journalism, and undermining democratic processes. SKF's intensive research in 2024 illustrated the profound harm these campaigns can cause, highlighting the urgent need for coordinated, multi-stakeholder responses.

All these developments are unfolding against the backdrop of a severe funding crisis. Independent media continues to be vulnerable due to unreliable, politically influenced funding cycles. The suspension of U.S. foreign aid programs in early 2025 starkly demonstrated the fragility of donor-dependent journalism. Developing resilient and diversified funding models is now more essential than ever.

SKF's Strategic Outlook for 2025 and Beyond

Building on the lessons of 2024, SKF is committed to advancing several strategic priorities to bolster independent media and support freedom of expression in the coming years:

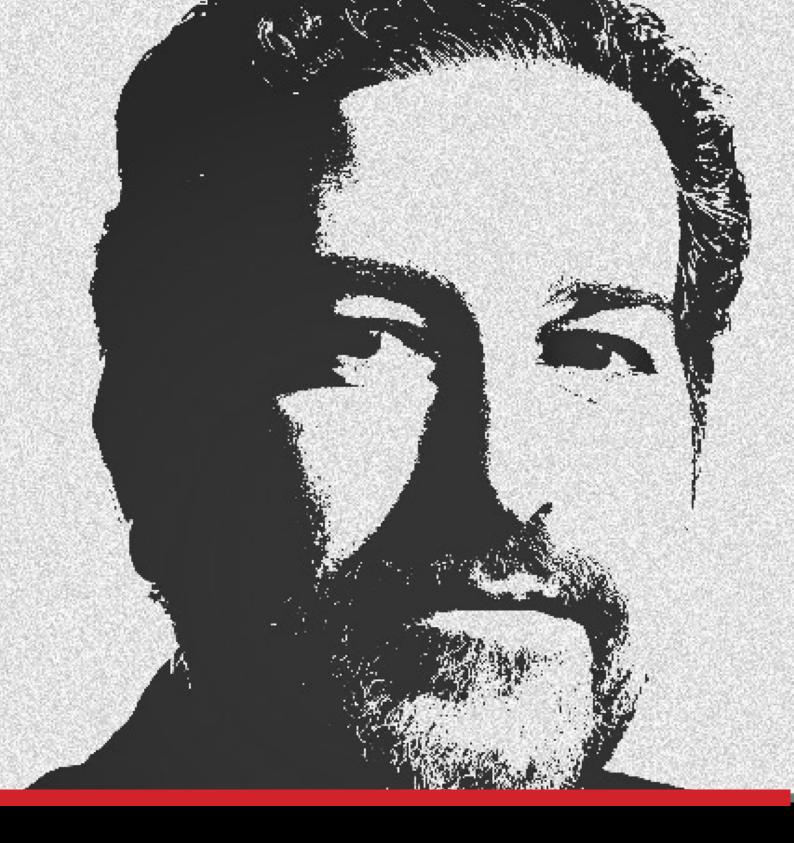
 Enhancing journalist safety and resilience: SKF will expand its safety-focused initiatives, strengthening physical, psychological, digital, and legal safety networks to ensure journalists can work securely and sustainably in conflict and crisis situations.

- Innovating for financial sustainability: SKF will accelerate the development and implementation of innovative revenue-generating models, further expanding initiatives such as Skroll and the Agency for Equality. These programs will help media outlets move closer to economic independence and resilience against sudden shifts in external funding.
- Combating digital threats and disinformation: Building upon its investigative work, SKF will intensify efforts to expose and counter digital disinformation campaigns. Collaborations with global technology and media partners will focus on creating tools and frameworks that enhance public literacy, accountability, and transparency around information manipulation campaigns.

A Commitment to Truth and Freedom

2024 vividly demonstrated how quickly and dramatically the landscape can change. Yet, SKF's mission remains unchanged: protecting and promoting independent journalism, freedom of expression, and culture as cornerstones of democratic and just societies. As we look toward 2025 and beyond, and despite the formidable challenges ahead, we firmly believe that truth, resilience, and solidarity will prevail.

Together with our local, regional, and international partners, we will continue fighting tirelessly to preserve and expand the space for journalism and free expression, ensuring that no voice is silenced, no truth suppressed, and no story left untold.



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