Annual Report 2020

The Samir Kassir Foundation
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Introduction: A Bleak 2020 Vision

In the decade leading up to this most exceptional of years, there had been an abundance of campaigns by a number of companies and institutions proclaiming an arbitrarily ambitious target to be met by the end of the decade itself. These campaigns were often dubbed with the now ironic slogan of “2020 vision”. It is fair to say that, in hindsight, “2020 vision” is not all it was cracked up to be. Although, it is also true that “2020 vision” has allowed us to see more clearly, and with greater detail, the violations against freedom of expression, the propagation of disinformation and hate speech, and the dire need for further support of cultural pursuits and journalists who have suffered as a result of Lebanon’s never-ending security, economic and political crises.

This challenging state of affairs is evident worldwide, but particularly so in the Levant, including Lebanon, where the COVID-19 pandemic was compounded by economic woes, security concerns, and the criminal negligence of the ruling class. Having said that, on the global stage, the Black Lives Matter movement in response to centuries of racial injustice, and social media’s potent reaction to disinformation and hate speech heralded a new beginning; in Lebanon, the perceived shift in culture – brought about by the October 17, 2019 revolution – towards accountability and away from clientelism, provided a glimmer of hope. After all, there is little use for vision, however impeccable, without at least a glimmer. Throughout this past year, the Samir Kassir Foundation has continued tackling disinformation, hate speech and digital safety as well as monitoring regional violations of freedom of expression, and providing support to independent media outlets, cultural endeavors, and journalists affected by the Beirut port explosion.
20 January
International press freedom and media development organizations CFI, Committee to Protect Journalists, Free Press Unlimited, International Media Support, and Media in Cooperation and Transition join SKF in condemning attacks on journalists in Lebanon and calling for perpetrators of violations to be held accountable.

25 February
The European Union and SKF launch the competition for the 15th edition of the Samir Kassir Award for Freedom of the Press.

31 March
SKF publishes a report entitled “Media and Protest Movements: Media Coverage of Demonstrations and Journalists’ Safety in Algeria, Chile, France, Iraq, and Lebanon” authored by Shane Farrell with the support of CFI.

1 April
SKF joins Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to call for the release of Yemeni journalists facing the death penalty ahead of World Press Freedom Day.

3 April
A jury chaired by SKF President Gisèle Khoury grants the 2020 UNESCO-Guillermo Cano Award to Colombian journalist Jineth Bedoya Lima.

28 May
SKF takes part in a conference at St-Joseph University in Beirut entitled “A hundred years of Lebanese press: the role and the freedom in the age of social networks.”

11 SKF co-signs a letter to President Donald Trump denouncing press freedom violations in the United States.

15 SKF launches its five-video campaign “Freedom is not a number.”

13 SKF joins 14 other Lebanese and international organizations to launch the “Coalition to Defend Freedom of Expression.”

27-29 Launch of the Adwa2 program for investigative journalism facing disinformation in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

12 SKF releases its mapping of the damage on the media sector after the August 4 blast in the port of Beirut.

20 SKF launches the Media Recovery Fund to support journalists and media organizations affected by the August 4 blast and enable a revival of the independent media sector in Lebanon.

25 Online webinar for Lebanese students and 2020 Samir Kassir Award finalists.

First night of the virtual 2020 Beirut Spring Festival entitled “For the Love of Beirut.”

1 SKF meets French President Emmanuel Macron during his second visit to Lebanon after the August 4 blast to present its Media Recovery Fund initiative.

Second night of the virtual 2020 Beirut Spring Festival entitled “For the Love of Beirut.”

10 The European Union and SKF announce the winners of the 2020 Samir Kassir Award for Freedom of the Press: Mostapha Abu Shams (Syria, investigative article), Rim Ben Rjeb (Tunisia, opinion piece), Dalal Mawad (Lebanon, audiovisual news report), and Kamal Ayash (Iraq, Students’ Prize).
October

2
SKF joins SMEX’s Bread & Net event to debate freedom of expression in Lebanon.

November

3
SKF publishes a report entitled “Media Coverage of Religious Freedom and Diversity in Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan” with the support of Internews.

17
SKF is named among the five short-listed for the 2020 UK-Canada Media Freedom Award.

December

2
SKF attends the International Donors’ Meeting to Support Lebanon chaired by French President Emmanuel Macron and UN Secretary General António Guterres.

21
SKF publishes a report on the cultural and theater sector in the 1948 Territories amid the COVID-19 crisis and funding crunch.

29
SKF publishes a report on the Lebanese independent media platforms entitled: “Content Analysis and Public Appeal” with the support of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation.

31
SKF publishes a report entitled “Digital Rights Awareness in Lebanon: Digital Rights as Human Rights” with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
In alphabetical order:

ACOS Alliance
Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ)
Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
CFI - the French Media Development Agency
Committee to Protect Journalists
Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Eurasia Foundation
European Services Network
European Union
Facebook Journalism Project
Free Press Unlimited
Friedrich Naumann Foundation
Global Forum for Media Development
Gulf Centre for Human Rights
International Media Support
International Republican Institute
International Women’s Media Foundation
James W. Foley Legacy Foundation
Marie Colvin Journalists’ Network
Media Diversity Institute
Meadan-Check Global
National Endowment for Democracy
Open Society Foundations
Reporters Without Borders
Rory Peck Trust
Sigrid Rausing Trust
Siren Associates
Thomson Reuters Foundation
UNESCO
United States Department of State
The year 2020 has witnessed several regional and global events that have led to the proliferation of disinformation on social media and beyond. From the outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019, the assassination of Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in January, until the United States presidential election in November, people worldwide were consuming fake news and misleading content daily from both traditional and social media. The extensive exploitation of the term “fake news” by politicians and officials in response to opposition voices helped spread further disinformation narratives, state propaganda, and incitement against anyone who dares to criticize the prevailing discourse.

Undoubtedly, the outbreak of the coronavirus and the vaccine race has left the world in information warfare. In addition to the lack of knowledge about COVID-19 and its cure, the states’ inability to cope with its spread has led to disseminating disinformation and conspiracy theories. During the first few months, when the virus started to spread, the main disinformation narratives focused on its origins and the seriousness of the situation. Conspiracy theories by anti-vaccination movements flooded social media, sowing doubts about the vaccine. Several countries also refused to declare the accurate daily number of new cases giving credit to their “successful” preventive policies in dealing with the pandemic. State-owned media outlets were responsible for disseminating the mentioned disinformation narratives, while the main focus currently remains on the global vaccine war.
On the regional level, after the October revolutions in Iraq and Lebanon in 2019, disinformation campaigns targeted activists, human rights defenders and journalists who are vocal against the authorities, corrupt political parties, and Iranian interference. Similar narratives were detected in both countries. Protests were said to be orchestrated by foreign countries, while activists were accused of treason and getting paid by foreign embassies. In Syria, the use of chemical weapons against civilians in the Syrian conflict, terrorism, the US and EU sanctions against the Syrian regime, the exacerbating economic crisis, and the safe return of refugees were among the main topics of disinformation campaigns in Russian and pro-Syrian regime media outlets. In Lebanon, the Syrian refugee crisis was exploited to justify the deteriorating economic and security situation and the government’s failure to act.

Moreover, social media users consume a variety of topics and news daily. They tend to trust information that aligns with their ideologies and views, without considering the necessity to check the sources or facts. Also, sometimes they only read the article’s title, which can be misleading and not directly related to the content. Major tech platforms such as Facebook and Twitter had to step up their efforts in taking down disinformation campaigns in 2020, as disinformation actors evolved their ways and strategies in response to detection on social media platforms. What distinguished the work of social media platforms during this year is the increase in operations’ attribution to specific actors. Twitter and Facebook also took additional measures to combat disinformation by labelling posts and tweets with misleading content. These efforts mainly responded to the misleading campaigns that have focused on COVID-19 and the US presidential election. However, the increased monitoring of content by social media platforms raised serious concerns regarding the restriction of freedom of expression.

In 2020, SKF monitored foreign media outlets to detect politically driven disinformation campaigns targeting Arabic speaking audience and worked on programs aimed at supporting journalists in the region to spot and counter disinformation narratives. Together with its international partners, SKF launched a new online platform, Adwa2.org, where investigative journalists in the Middle East and North Africa can access the latest articles, guides, training materials, and tools developed to debunk and counter disinformation in both English and Arabic. Under Adwa2, independent investigative journalists had the opportunity to attend intensive training workshops tailored by SKF’s partners to cover the required skills of investigative journalism when dealing with the region’s complexity. SKF also organized webinars, hosting local experts to address the latest disinformation trends in the region, such as the disinformation campaigns on social media following the Beirut port explosion in August 2020. By assisting journalists in improving their investigative skills, they can become a trusted source of information and well equipped to expose disinformation narratives and hold those in power responsible for any negligence or failure.

1- https://www.adwa2.org/
Inflammatory Rhetoric

It is no secret that hate speech has found itself welcomed back into the mainstream of late. It never truly went away, even if, at times in the past, hate speech was uttered with less conviction and in the dark corners or the hushed tones of those who suspected their words of being, by and large, unwelcome. No longer – if ever – does this assumption hold true. On the global stage, the former President of the United States’ own use of Twitter as a tool with which to incite violence and propagate hurtful stereotypes about immigrants, refugees, women, people of color, and other marginalized groups, is in itself a measure of the shift in the rhetoric over the past few years. More than a measure, in fact, Trump’s tweets and general demeanor have been a factor in the resurgence, or amplification, of hate speech.

Hate speech was not born with the advent of social media, nor is the former entirely dependent upon the latter. One need only look to extreme right-wing conservative media pundits or news outlets for confirmation, in the US or elsewhere. Although, it is certainly true that social media has disproportionately amplified, manifold, the voices of those who seek to spread discriminatory rhetoric often targeting marginalized groups, with violent ends.

Both organic and enforced measures have been taken in the worldwide fight against hate speech. In October 2020, the hashtag #ProudBoys, initially propagated by the far-right group of the same name, was hijacked by members of the LGBTQ+ community who used it to counter the hate speech with images of love. Twitter itself recently suspended Trump’s account indefinitely, along with Facebook and many other social media platforms, in response to his spread of disinformation (frequently to the detriment of marginalized groups) and incitement of violence.
In Lebanon, hate speech finds itself on fertile ground with sectarian divisions, economic woes, and the pandemic proving a potent mix. Early in November 2020, the Lebanese Minister of Interior and Municipalities, Mohamed Fehmi made an offhand sexist remark, alluding to women’s domestic role, in response to a question on live TV about the lockdown. Fehmi received widespread condemnation via independent media outlets, especially, which sought to expose his outdated and insulting words for what they were. This past January, the Lebanese singer, Rami Ayach, asserted that he was not opposed to the marriage of underage women. Finally, writer, director, ardent supporter of the Lebanese President, and persistent homophobe, Charbel Khalil continued his ongoing crusade against the LGBTQ+ community, setting up ‘gay conversion therapy’ and blaming the October 17, 2019 revolution on LGBTQ+ allies.

SKF’s Media Monitoring report for the month of December 2020 has revealed that while traditional media, specifically the news and political talk shows, tend to ignore marginalized groups altogether, social media users often engage in incendiary rhetoric which is not divorced from real life consequences – directly or otherwise. A particularly evident example would be the burning of Syrian refugee camps in Minieh on the night of the December 26, 2020. While not strictly hate speech, insidious and inflammatory rhetoric of the type found across Twitter, as well as the Facebook pages of Lebanese political parties and TV channels, paves the way for tragic incidents such as the burning of the Syrian refugee camps.

As evidenced throughout this report, independent media outlets have been instrumental in the battle against the proliferation of hate speech. Amongst the first of many activities to come, as part of the “Inclusive Media, Cohesive Society” project, is a funding mechanism for independent media outlets, which SKF has set up alongside Thomson Reuters Foundation and Media Diversity Institute. This funding mechanism seeks to equip independent media outlets with the necessary tools to combat hate speech and continue to increase their representation of marginalized groups via capacity building and financial support. Six of said outlets have now been confirmed as recipients of the initial grant.

The disproportionate manner in which social media amplifies the voices of hate speech means that there is much work to be done in order to ensure that the rhetoric is not skewed – nor the level of discourse permitted to plummet – in that direction. This fine tuning of the discourse across social media and beyond must also simultaneously safeguard freedom of expression.

With the speedy development of technological progress and the COVID-19 pandemic, people have become less dependent on physical presence, and more so on distant market transactions and social media interactions in order to acquire goods or communicate with their colleagues, friends, and audience. This raises a set of questions about how security priorities ought to be shifted, whether physical safety has become less relevant and the manner in which it opens the door to caring about digital safety.

On a global level, the political scene has produced a volatile sketch of rising and falling right-wing populists and authoritarian leaders, throughout different continents. While the traditional conversation revolving around freedoms and liberal values remains a window of contestation, a noticeable shift in the debate towards topics such as surveillance and privacy highlights a new important aspect pertaining to citizenship, repression, and liberty.

According to several reports and briefs published in the past two years, including but not restricted to a 2020 policy brief 4 by the Issam Fares Institute and a 2018 snapshot by Social Media Exchange (SMEX) 5, it is increasingly clear that several attributes related to digital threats ought to alarm the average citizen in all countries. First and foremost, there exists an extensive global disparity concerning access to the internet, with a clear asymmetry between developed and developing countries. Second, digitally-sponsored censorship of online content promoted and propagated by activists remains a tool used by governments to further their interests. This is primarily an issue within the Middle East, where authoritarian governments still remain the region’s dominant political force.

Meanwhile, a more international phenomenon, which stands as a controversial topic amongst many, is the idea of government surveillance. With the rise of security threats stemming from terror attacks and inter-state wars, governments have utilized these developments 6 as a pretext to spy on their citizens and extract their information without prior advanced consent. According to an article published by the EDRi Network 7, these practices, including biosurveillance and online tracking, have expanded to unprecedented levels during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, with the overall hostile environment to digital rights, citizens generally lack the tools to combat, challenge, and prevent cyberattacks which may infringe upon their individual privacy and autonomy on a plethora of levels. In the Lebanese context, this is specifically alarming given that cases of hacking have led to false allegations related to notions of “treason” and other illegalities which may jeopardize the basic freedoms of state opponents. This reached a climax in 2017-2018 with the case of Ziad Itani, an actor, who was subject to hacking by state officials abusing their power. The state agents had accused Itani of being a foreign agent. Further suspicions of increased state surveillance arose when The Lookout and Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) published a report 8 in 2018 suggesting that a global cyber espionage targeting 21 countries since 2012 may have originated from one of the Lebanese General Security Directorate’s buildings in Beirut.

These threats escalated in Lebanon following the October 17, 2019 revolution, with demonstrators constantly complaining about state infiltrators and spies interjecting WhatsApp group conversations and acquiring information about protests and demonstrations planned ahead. While the challenges are heavy and overwhelming, recent studies conducted by the Samir Kassir Foundation conclude that awareness about and opposition to unwanted surveillance and excess online repression are quite limited. Consistent meddling and use of repression targeted citizens’ social posts too: according to SMEX, around 56 summonses targeted 60 people in Lebanon due to posts on social media platforms and websites between October 2019 and October 2020. Much of these summonses were ordered or requested by members of Lebanon’s political establishment.

Overall, in Lebanon, digital safety is not high on the list of priorities of the average citizen in their daily life (especially those with no political motives to be safe). Digital safety primarily concerns ways in which these persons’ moderate access to their social media accounts, use messenger applications, and browse the internet on a recurrent basis. In order to tackle this issue, SKF has produced a set of essential projects, commencing with the aforementioned research study on digital rights awareness.

The SKF Digital Rights Awareness report was produced in order to grasp how people and citizens, from a variety of professions, think about digital rights and the remedies to hacking and privacy violations. To do this, the study utilized a questionnaire and focus group conversations to better understand ways in which journalists, doctors, teachers, lawyers, students, and tech professionals protect themselves in their daily lives.

The report concluded that many in Lebanon generally maintain a low level of knowledge about digital safety and digital rights, despite acknowledging the existence of a virtual reality which occupies much of their time and space. This is also accompanied by a shift in moral priorities, in which concepts of security may trump digital rights for some professions in which knowledge of personal data is perceived to be important in order to guarantee a certain level of security. This is not to mention the little-to-no trust in Lebanese authorities in terms of formulating, implementing, and enforcing the necessary legislation to protect digital rights.

Furthermore, SKF set up digital and physical safety training for journalists and activists. Physical safety training sessions were held with 62 journalists covering developments in Lebanon and the region, in partnership with the ACOS Alliance, Silk Road Training, the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, and Marie Clovin Journalists’ Network. In light of the numerous online violations and physical assaults targeting the aforementioned groups in the Arab world and Lebanon, live and online sessions were held in order to instigate an interactive and educational conversation about the ways in which journalists may protect themselves from digital invasions and acquire the essential first aid skills. This constitutes an evaluation of risks, safe communication, safe passwords, phone safety, safe methods through which protests may be covered, and ways in which journalists can overcome faux perceptions of safety and security.

In order to elaborate the above goals, a set of exercises were conducted to discuss the nature of the internet, SMS and online messaging and communication, fishy and fake applications, alongside the role of political dynamics, regional structures, and local security in curtailing or furthering such a phenomenon. As a result, participants discovered the available tools at their disposal to protect themselves. Some examples include choice of application, end-to-end encryption, VPN, as well as safe, complex and secure passwords.

In the Lebanese context, digital safety remains a challenge for the millions of people in the country who constantly use their devices on a recurrent basis in order to work, buy products, and communicate with their colleagues and friends. This issue is further exacerbated when linked to political agendas which involve hacking and spying on active figures and groups.

Despite the urgency of this issue, a lack of knowledge in security tools compounds the stagnation for many youngsters at risk of blackmail and privacy invasion. Accordingly, SKF is determined to further pursue recurrent training sessions for journalists, students, and members of other professions with the end of spreading awareness, as well as supplying individuals and groups with the necessary tools to challenge these violations.
Independent Media Outlets Coming of Age

Despite the many uprisings across the MENA region over the past years, legacies of oppression and censorship still impact the space for freedom of expression. These legacies come in many forms: through unfriendly legal systems, self-censorship to avoid repercussions, potential loss of funding, or worse. Prominent traditional media outlets with access to platforms such as TV, radio and even recently social media pages, maintain a high viewership, simply because they had a “head start” for aligning with the status quo at all times. However, this has not discouraged ambitious people around the region from taking initiative and telling another side of the story. Feelings of resentment, skepticism, a strong desire for accountable channels and reliable information culminated in the emergence of many alternative, youth-led, independent media outlets.

In order to better comprehend the media landscape, SKF surveyed the traditional, prominent channels, to assess the representation of religious freedoms and countries’ diversities, as well as independent, youth-oriented alternative media outlets. Media development is a core part of SKF’s activities. Therefore, based on the work accomplished during certain projects, SKF has identified a multitude of ways the alternative media outlets have been “coming of age.” Today, they not only attract younger, more progressive crowds but also stand out from traditional media channels. The alternative outlets tackle topics such as gender, social issues, culture and human rights, which are often overlooked or addressed differently by mainstream media for being taboo. They offer an alternative perspective, even if it does not fit well with traditional views, paving the way for societal change. These outlets also tend to deliver highly entertaining, engaging, as well as informative content, while providing adequate numbers of sources and references. An example of this in Lebanon would be Megaphone, who became one of the go-to outlets after the events of October 17, 2019. Megaphone analyzes and presents complex political/economic developments and communicate them in a simplified and engaging way.

At the same time, independent media outlets exhibited certain points worth improving, that would add greatly to the value of the content delivered. Considering that video interviews are among the most popular types of content used in the Maghreb region, there is much room for development in terms of production and filmography. For example, sound issues, proper equipment, clearer messaging, and improved storytelling are some of several aspects which could be enhanced. Meanwhile, the approach, topics, and sources chosen, must be consistently reviewed over time, as independent outlets may be relying on a “niche” following to some extent. They need to be wary of becoming echo chambers so that they continue to grow. For example, in Lebanon, content produced by independent media is yet to grow beyond its current limited, urban, progressive, young, upper middle-class audience. Finally, the question of sustainability must be clearly answered as these relatively young outlets rely quasi-exclusively on support from international donors and media development organizations.
Crucially, the above points do not apply equally to all the monitored outlets. The situation differs greatly from one country to another and even amongst the outlets themselves, but these are the primary themes which point to a general trend.

On the other hand, in SKF’s study on religious freedoms and representation of minorities, the majority of the prominent, traditional outlets monitored did not spread direct hate speech. However, many implicitly painted certain segments of society in a specific light. Whether it was a positive or negative light as well as the nature of the highlighted topics depended on an outlet’s political affiliation and funding. Selection biases may be difficult to alter in institutions, nevertheless, individual journalists can also do their part to raise journalistic standards. It is reassuring to see that these characteristics were not observed in the alternative independent outlets such as Al Hudood or Raseef 22.

While many independent media outlets have come on leaps and bounds since their inception, there is the sense still that they might benefit from the presence of a steady commitment to guide them forward. This will be crucial if independent media outlets are to not only compete with but surpass the traditional media, while addressing even more pertinent, daring topics.
Democracy in Distress as Lebanon Falters and Deceives

In a country formerly renowned for its deliberate chasing down of trends, one in particular has unfortunately caught the attention of late. Over the past few years, Lebanon has witnessed an upsurge in repression. Freedom of expression and freedom of the press have gradually declined since, with violations on a crescendo in 2020. Today, Lebanon is not much different than autocracies and police states which impose their authority through security services, militias and corrupt politicians who abuse broad and abstract defamation laws, while also resorting to military trials of protesters. Repression reflects the authorities’ helplessness in finding solutions to the financial, economic and political crises, particularly after the August 4, 2020 tragic explosion and the inability of the judiciary to hold the perpetrators accountable, thereby exposing the authorities’ corruption and neglect.

Although Lebanese President Michel Aoun, and other officials, repeatedly expressed their will to respect freedom of expression as guaranteed by the Lebanese Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that Lebanon adopted in 1948, reality proved quite different.
Lebanon abstained from signing the final declaration of the Ministerial Meeting at the second Global Conference for Media Freedom under the pretext of “having concerns about some clauses contradicting Lebanese laws” particularly one that would allow members of the LGBTQ+ community to express themselves freely. Such actions further cemented Lebanon’s position as a homophobic state beholden to the pressures of conservative confessional groups. The authorities also opted to apply a draconian measure dating back to the end of the last century, when the country was still under Syrian tutelage: the Lebanese Army Orientation Directorate required journalists to get prior authorization if they wish to conduct and film interviews with citizens on Lebanese territories. Equally noteworthy is the fact that the aforementioned decision has been applied inconsistently, which is yet another sign of the dismal state of governance within the Lebanese public sector.

The biggest breach of international conventions remains, however, the use of excessive force and unjustified violence against protesters, journalists, photographers and reporters. The brutal repression of media professionals at the hands of the riot police, the Parliament police, and Lebanese Army took various forms. All three apparatuses beat up members of the media, broke their equipment, fired rubber-coated bullets at them, and sprayed them with teargas during the protests to prevent them from documenting the violations against protesters. Neither the supporters of the political parties who were involved in the assaults nor the security officers who attacked the media professionals and protesters were held accountable for their acts.

It is no secret that the Lebanese Army and Internal Security Forces receive financial, technical, and training support from donor countries. The brutal repression carried out by those forces against journalists and protesters places substantial responsibility on Lebanon’s international partners. It is imperative that said donors consider new conditions for support upon security forces, particularly in light of the prevailing impunity and lack of accountability. Security forces must show the international community that they respect the rule of law, and freedom of expression in particular, by taking several actions such as enhancing accountability. These actions would serve as a reference for the country’s partners and allow them to monitor Lebanon’s ability to honor its international commitments.

In addition, the politicization of the Lebanese media scene incites protesters and supporters of other political parties to carry out attacks against journalists during live coverage. Reporters are automatically associated with the media outlets they work for, particularly those working for pro-government media. Not to mention smear campaigns which are launched by “electronic armies,” supporting Lebanese political parties, against journalists expressing their opinions on social media.

These challenges underline two urgent necessities: first, the need for journalists and photographers to undertake training on physical safety and digital security because most of them do not possess the necessary skills to protect themselves during live coverage or in the virtual world. Second, there is also the need to empower and fund civil society organizations, particularly those aimed at protecting freedom of expression and documenting violations. It is important to support the awareness campaigns organized by CSOs to ensure the participation of all segments of society in protecting freedom of expression and thus exert further pressure to reform the antiquated laws.

In the aftermath of the October 17 revolution, which had broken the barrier of fear for the people, Lebanese authorities clamped down on freedoms and prosecuted dozens of individuals criticizing them on social or traditional media. Politicians were explicitly involved in cases related to freedom of expression. For instance, people who were found guilty in publications-related verdicts were mostly journalists, while the plaintiffs were official political figures. Also, the number of summonses by the public prosecution and security services has drastically increased: more than 30 journalists and activists were summoned for questioning on various charges and under vague laws that serve the interest of politicians (the plaintiffs), while security and judicial authorities failed to arrest those who attack journalists and activists. Media professionals were either subjected to pre-trial detention to intimidate them after being summoned, or made to suffer through lengthy trials to exhaust them and further tighten the noose around freedom of expression.

Therefore, it is of vital importance to clearly set out and define the role of the Anti-Cybercrime and Intellectual Property Rights Bureau away from issues related to freedom of expression. It is equally pressing to train lawyers, judges and even security forces on the manner through which to deal with such issues to guarantee freedom of expression. The training of the relevant bodies would also limit coercive measures against individuals such as pre-trial detention, forcing them to sign pledges or delete social media posts under the threat of detention and other methods used by the security forces before trials so that journalists and activists begin resorting to self-censorship in order to protect themselves.

Lebanon has long had the reputation of being one of the freest countries in the region. This year, however, more than 190 violations were documented against media professionals, activists, writers and directors. The Lebanese authorities and their security services are quelling dissenting views. These coercive measures do not bode well for the future of the country but rather forecast more restrictions.
## 2019-2020 Violations - Lebanon

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The year 2020 marked 50 years of Assad family rule in Syria. The father, Hafez, ruled the country for three decades while the son, Bashar, completed 20 years in office this year; half a century during which the Assad military regime managed to strengthen its grip on all institutions. The Ba’ath party took control of trade unions and cultural institutions. Its security forces resorted to arrests, dismissals, as well as legal and constitutional amendments to implement these changes.

Essentially, Assad, Sr. controlled the entire country by making phone calls from his office. In 1973, Hafez al-Assad adopted a constitution that gave the president absolute power. In 1976, he took repressive measures against professional syndicates and labor unions. In 1982, an armed conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood resulted in the Hama massacre. Hafez al-Assad destroyed the city, while continuing to interfere in Lebanese affairs.

In 2000, Bashar became president after the death of his father. The king is dead; long live the king. He inherited the land, the people, the power, and the countless bloodbaths. The early years of his reign were similar to his father’s: constitutional amendments then economic liberalization and political reform attempts. The civil uprisings and the Damascus Spring led to more arrests and full control over military and political authorities. In March 2011, the flames of the Arab Spring reached Syria; the violence that followed was unimaginable.

Bashar al-Assad inherited his father’s temperament, but also his political agenda which he extensively applied over the last ten years. The extensive conflict in Syria steadily, and then all at once, weakened his rule, thereby opening the door to foreign interference, including but not limited to Iran, Russia and Turkey. Tens of thousands of people died, millions were displaced, while most cities and villages were destroyed. Over the past year, the economy crumbled and the Syrian pound collapsed. Most families are now living below the poverty line and the COVID-19 pandemic is wreaking havoc in the population. The poverty, the virus, the war and the displacement did not stop the presidency from further concentrating whatever is left of power. The regime replaced the heads of influential security agencies and dismissed the old economic leaders with the help of new warlords. Luna Al-Shibl was promoted to the role of media advisor to the president.
Assad, Sr. governed the entire country. Assad, Jr. only rules what Russia and Iran are willing to concede. This parcel of land that Bashar al-Assad and his allies control is similar to a large, heavily guarded prison. Protectors of the “homeland” prevent Syrian expatriates from entering their country unless they pay USD 100. Those who wished to leave the country found it increasingly difficult to do so.

Media and cultural violations in 2020 reflect the political and military situation in Syria and predict the upcoming changes. During the rule of Bashar al-Assad, the security forces tightened control of public life. “353 citizen journalists, including two women and four foreign journalists” are still detained in the regime’s prisons. This is the result of the last 10 years. In 2020, the security services also arrested and murdered citizen journalists in reconciliation areas such as Daraa and Damascus countryside. This Syrian regime and its security services do not have a monopoly on these practices. This “cleansing” policy is widely used by other fighting forces.

The other military forces on the Syrian territory have adopted their enemy Bashar al-Assad’s approach. They increased restrictions on freedom of information and expression. In addition to arrests and assassinations, Tahrir Al-Sham militant group has created a media department that delivers work permits for journalists in areas under its control. The Kurdish forces, represented by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, were the first to establish such a department. The power of the media scares all military forces. They want to control it by any means.

In 2020, Syria is back to what it was in the past: a country with one leader, one party, one opinion. However, this year’s version is different from the old one in the sense that, before, it was one leader “for all.” Today, the situation has radically changed. In the regions under the influence of Tahrir Al-Sham, citizens have to praise Al-Julani. He visits families and appears on TV and social media as a “cool” leader. Under Assad, people ought to glorify the “conquering hero” and his “kind-hearted wife” whose political intentions remain unknown. As for the citizens under the influence of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, they alternate between being hostile to Assad and wanting to negotiate with him.

The next Syrian presidential elections are due to be held in 2021. Bashar al-Assad has yet to decide if he wants to run for president. Will the country keep on being Assad’s jungle or should one expect a miracle? Will the real ruler of Syria, Vladimir Putin, surprise the world with bold decisions? And will the war keep on making the poor poorer and the warlords richer?

The political and military life in the country does not augur well for radical positive changes. Syria will keep its doors shut, preventing those inside from leaving and those abroad from entering the country. If killings have dropped in 2020, people are still slowly dying in detention but also of starvation, while the collapse of the pound is hastening death.

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16- https://sn4hr.org/arabic/2020/05/03/12176/
17- Reconciliation areas are ones which are subject, once again, to the authority of the Syrian regime as a result of an agreement, or series of agreements, between the Syrian regime and its allies, on the one hand, and the armed Syrian opposition on the other. These agreements will usually offer guarantees, in return, that members of the Syrian opposition will not be harmed, or else safely transported away from the disputed areas.
## 2019-2020 Violations - Syria

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### Total

104
The year of 2020 was one in which media and cultural freedoms were repeatedly trampled upon in Jordan. Only eight direct physical assaults were documented but arrests and trials over publications peaked, reaching 24 cases. Journalists and activists took to the streets over and over again. Several cases of cyber bullying were monitored. Furthermore, 70 media professionals were suspended from work for various reasons, another one submitted their “cultural” resignation, a TV channel was shut down for a full month and a newspaper was fined the astronomical amount of JOD 150,000 (nearly USD 210,000). The government suspended newspaper printing and distribution in response to the COVID-19 pandemic while two government-affiliated media institutions were given exclusive access to information and coronavirus-related statements.

With every violation, new questions emerge and old ones resurface, all of which remain unanswered or unjustified. Who gave the State Security Court the green light to arrest journalists over an article or a tweet? Who gave the public prosecutors the right to summon, question and intimidate them? Who allowed security forces to pull them out of their vehicles like criminals and drive them to the station where they are beaten, handcuffed, tied to chairs and insulted? Who is responsible for spewing venom onto the media and the cultural scene actors, in order to intimidate them? As long as this intimidation policy is allowed and no serious measures are taken to regulate the situation, monitor it and ensure accountability, no constructive change can be implemented. It is undeniable that these drastic measures do not augur well. Any authority that is afraid of freedom of expression in this social media age is close to turning into a failed state.

So far, it seems that the authorities are determined to continue applying these oppressive decisions with no consideration whatsoever for the freedoms as a whole nor for Jordan’s reputation worldwide. The year did not start off on a positive note when the Media Commission decided, in January, to shut down a TV channel for a month. The end of the year was also far from promising: a journalist was arrested for a week and the Amman Magistrate’s Criminal Court issued, on December 31, a decision to dissolve the Jordan Teachers’ Syndicate and imprison its board members for a period of one year. Furthermore, Amman’s Attorney General decided to ban media publishing on the developments of the aforementioned case and arrested three journalists for violating this decision.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that media professionals have broken the barrier of fear in Jordan by organizing several protests after the State Security Court arrested journalist Jamal Haddad for a week at the Marka prison. He was detained over an article that raised questions about government officials receiving the COVID-19 vaccine when it was not yet available to the general public. As a result, journalists and activists resorted to escalation by boycotting government news and activity, while 80 news websites went dark for a few hours in protest against Haddad’s detention. It is to be hoped that the recent outcry will put an end to all those oppressive policies which are tarnishing Jordan’s image as a beacon of stability in the region.

18- https://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/News/30-01-2020/8292
20- https://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/News/28-12-2020/9042
# 2019-2020 Violations - Jordan

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**Official Censorship**
- Blocking online content: 2
- Legal action: 1
- Assault on journalists by non-state actors: 1
- Assault on journalists by security forces: 2
- Detention: 1
- Summons and interrogation: 2
- Threats and harassment: 1

**Total Violations:** 44
That Palestine should suffer under the weight of an oppressive lockdown is not altogether new, but that it should do so also in response to the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbates an already dire situation. The pandemic took its toll on freedom of expression and journalists in Palestine. Both the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip declared a state of emergency to stem the spread of the virus. However, this state of emergency also served as a pretext to undermine freedom of expression and prosecute journalists, particularly when criticizing either the two “authorities” or the measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 on social media. The Israeli violations against Palestinian photographers and journalists covering the ‘peaceful return’ demonstrations in the three regions (the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the 1948 Territories) declined due to COVID-19 restrictions. Nevertheless, this did not prevent Israeli forces from arresting journalists and raiding cultural institutions.

In the West Bank, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas declared a 30-day state of emergency in early March 2020 amid the COVID-19 outbreak. This period was extended ten times, which raised questions about its legitimacy. According to the 2003 Amended Basic Law, the President of the National Authority may declare a state of emergency by decree for a period not exceeding thirty days. The state of emergency may be extended for another period of thirty days if a two-thirds majority of the members of the Legislative Council vote in favor of the extension (which did not happen because the Legislative Council’s activity is suspended).

Journalists and activists feared the continuous renewal of the state of emergency. Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Ashtieh claimed that “the government will stand up for human rights, preserve freedoms and ensure they shall not be flouted during the state of emergency.” However, 14 violations against journalists were documented based on the Palestinian Cybercrime Law, which was drafted and applied by the executive authority despite media outlets and human rights organizations’ disapproval. Media professionals were therefore arrested and questioned on charges of insulting the authorities, inciting sectarian strife and defamation among others, for criticizing the manner in which the national authority and security services deal with the COVID-19 outbreak. Wafa news agency journalists Rami Samara and Jaafar Sadaqa were referred to an investigation committee and their salaries were frozen under the pretext of “violating the state of emergency.” But, in fact, both journalists were questioned over Facebook posts that the news agency’s management was “not satisfied” with.

Also, intellectuals and scholars were prosecuted because of their opinions and activities. An-Najah University issued a warning against academic Adnan Melhem over an article in which he states that the Palestinian education sector is not yet ready for e-learning.

The Israeli forces, along with settlers, continued their violations against Palestinian journalists and photographers, albeit at a slower pace than in previous years because of the lockdown measures which reduced the opportunity for direct confrontation. Israeli forces deliberately attacked media professionals with live ammunition, rubber-coated bullets, teargas, and stun grenades. They also beat them, broke their equipment and detained them for long hours to prevent them from covering unarmed protesters’ treatment at the hands of Israeli forces during peaceful demonstrations. Most arrests turned into administrative detentions without charge or trial and were often extended every three to six months by Israeli military courts.

22- https://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/News/06-04-2020/8458
Thin-Skinned Hamas Government Preaches Positivity

Violations decreased significantly in the Gaza Strip because of the pandemic. The ‘peaceful return’ marches in which Israeli soldiers carried out attacks against journalists and photographers, at the borders, came to a halt. However, the soldiers opened fire several times this year on journalists covering developments in the eastern part of the Gaza Strip.

The Hamas government continued to muzzle those criticizing its policies on social media or protesting for better living conditions, fearing, above all, that these claims would undermine the militant group’s control over the territories. Therefore, the Hamas government’s security services used charges such as “Internet misuse and spreading rumors on social media” as an excuse to arrest, harass, and prosecute journalists. Dozens were summoned and questioned over allegations of organizing protests for better living conditions. Writer Abdullah Abu Sharakh was arrested for 27 days for, according to Hamas, “spreading rumors” on Facebook under the pretext that “he should use his words to spread positivity instead of criticism!”

1948 Territories Fall into 1984 Nightmare

As a result of the restrictions and lockdown measures imposed more than once by the Israeli government in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the violations carried out against Palestinian journalists and photographers during the peaceful protests in Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa mosque decreased significantly. Nonetheless, Israeli authorities continued to apply their discriminatory policies against Arab citizens. Despite the rapid spread of the virus and the high number of people infected within the Arab community, the percentage of coronavirus-related news in Arabic on Israeli channels was particularly low (less than 2%), keeping in mind that Arab citizens should be represented in 8% of the total broadcasts according to Israeli law. Also, the Arab cultural institutions were hard hit by the pandemic and people working in the sector suffered from a severe financial crisis, particularly because of the scarce government funding compared to Israeli cultural institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic did not prevent the Israeli police from raiding Palestinian cultural institutions under the pretext of “violating Israeli sovereignty” (receiving support from the Palestinian Authority), prosecuting journalists who cover the events organized by said institutions, arresting them, and questioning them on charges of “threatening Israel’s security.”

While it is true that field violations declined in Palestine because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Israel as well as the “two authorities” in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip continued to crack down on journalists. The catastrophic impact which the pandemic has wrought upon Palestine, and indeed around the globe, is undeniable. The equally pressing matter of freedom of press, and freedom of expression, has found itself relegated on the list of priorities. On this evidence, however, when the pandemic induced lockdown is finally lifted once and for all, there will remain another more perilous lockdown which a vaccine alone cannot resolve.

23- https://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/News/12-04-2020/8471
24- https://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/News/24-04-2020/8504
## 2019-2020 Violations - West Bank

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### Categories
- Unofficial censorship on arts & culture
- Blocking online content
- Assault on journalists by non-state actors
- Assault on journalists by security forces
- Prison sentence against journalists
- Detention
- Summons and interrogation
- Threats and harassment

### Notes
- Total violations: 98
### 2019-2020 Violations - Gaza

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# 2019-2020 Violations - 1948 Territories

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Official censorship on arts & culture, blocking online content, legal action, assault on journalists by security forces, detention, summons and interrogation, armed attack on media offices, threats and harassment.
The COVID-19 Culture Conundrum

The Samir Kassir Foundation’s Beirut Spring Festival (BSF), like most other cultural initiatives in Lebanon, has faced its fair share of challenges since the initial burst of optimism amidst the revolution of October 2019. Prior to the ongoing pandemic, Lebanon was already trying to navigate through a challenging economic and political situation that was beginning to put a strain on the country’s cultural sector.

Faced with the rising economic, social and political tensions that reached their peak by the end of 2019, the country witnessed the cancellation, postponement or indefinite suspension of formerly vibrant cultural happenings. As the month of June arrived, our yearly rendezvous with BSF, the COVID-19 outbreak was now wreaking havoc on the cultural sector. The latter was harshly affected because of the shutdown of cultural venues and the lockdowns.

Nevertheless, suspending BSF’s activities on the ground allowed SKF to think with a more sustainable approach and envision a political roadmap for culture in Lebanon. As of June 2020, SKF’s new partnership with the Friederich Naumann Foundation facilitated the initiation of a pilot project that revolves around rethinking cultural policymaking in Lebanon.

The main outcome would be the establishment of a think tank or policy center within SKF, specialized in the production of full-fledged cultural policies and the advocacy for their implementation by the relevant authorities. This center would be constantly producing and promoting policy briefs, policy papers, and responses to government proposals. The overreaching goal of the project is to turn culture into a sustainable economic and social comparative advantage in Lebanon.

Working on a project that has a policy scope allowed SKF’s cultural department to contribute to the ongoing process of reshaping Lebanon’s future alongside other groups from civil society, as opposed to sitting idly by.

In 2020, BSF moved online and was scheduled a few weeks after the August 4 Beirut blast. The virtual, live festival was planned as a solidarity message with Beirut on the nights of August 25 and September 1 and was broadcast through BSF’s Facebook page. The title for the 12th edition of BSF was “For the Love of Beirut”.

SKF showcased several international artists who took part in BSF since its creation in 2009 and until 2019. Among those were Wajdi Mouawad, Morven Macbeth, Katy Grandi, Cyrine Gannoun, and musicians such as Kinan Azmeh, Rami Khalifé, Bachar Mar Khalifé, Marc Reaidy and Alexandra Dariescu. The festival also hosted dancers from Bridgman Packer Dance (US) and Interface dance company. The international artists responded positively, with great compassion, to the invitation and were eager to share a message of hope with Lebanon.
August 4: Aftermath and Accountability

August 4, 2020 is a date that will be forever engrained in the hearts of every single soul who witnessed the horror of this tragic blast. In the following days, while the Lebanese went about healing one another’s physical and psychological wounds, the incompetence and the absence of the state continued to plumb further depths, and, in so doing, sent a strong message: Lebanon cannot go back to the pre-August 4 business-as-usual model. While this state of affairs first and foremost applies to state institutions, it also applies to the manner in which the media and civil society approach their role in society.

The Samir Kassir Foundation’s SKeyes Center, with the support of its local and international partners, had an immediate, on-the-ground, reaction to contribute to the recovery of the media sector in Lebanon and to its reconstruction on more solid ground. To this end, the Media Recovery Fund was created just a few days after the blast, not only in order to help journalists in distress but also to contribute to a stronger and more accountable media industry which can lead to the vital changes that Lebanon needs. Such a development allows the media to better hold those in power accountable for their inaction, ask the right questions, develop capabilities to form investigations, and reflect citizens’ needs.

Initially, even the most affected journalists were reluctant to ask for help as they thought that there were more urgent priorities among the huge number of casualties. It was the Media Recovery Fund that took the initiative to reach them and convince them to accept the help they deserved. The Media Recovery Fund immediately provided medical (including psycho-social) and livelihood support, followed by workplace damage repair and equipment replacement, thereby allowing journalists to resume their work, and imparting them with a new vision. Underpinning the entire endeavor is SKF’s firm belief that free press saves lives. In ensuring that journalists feel the weight of support embodied by the Media Recovery Fund, SKF strives to secure a landscape that is more hospitable to holding those in power accountable for their crimes.

By December 31, 2020, the Media Recovery Fund provided support to a total of 42 journalists and media organizations.

Conclusion

Those who have chosen to write off 2020 as a year to forget are undoubtedly justified in doing so. Though it is worth remembering the lessons of this chastening year, especially as far as the Samir Kassir Foundation is concerned, in matters to do with freedom of press, constructive discourse, accountability, and the value of information, judiciously primed and shrewdly conveyed. If there is merit at all in the now ludicrous “2020 vision” slogan, it is in its newfound role as a humbling reminder that flawless vision serves no purpose in the darkness.