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مركز الخليج لحقوق الإنسان

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مع
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WE ACT TOGETHER

MEDIA
PORTRAYAL
OF **CIVIL**
SOCIETY

MOROCCO,
BAHRAIN,
& IRAQ

#WeActogether

Produced by: Gulf Centre for Human
Rights (GCHR)

And Innovation for Change (I4C) Middle
East and North Africa Hub

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Executive Summary

The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) and the Innovation for Change MENA Hub commissioned a media analysis of the portrayal of civil society, including the role of human rights defenders, civil society organisations (CSOs), journalists, and activists working for change in society. The work is being managed by GCHR with the Innovation for Change MENA Hub in the framework of the civil society campaign project, under the MENA Hub objective to act as an advocate for the MENA region's civic space and human rights issues and develop adapted evidence-based resources and tools for effective campaigning and advocacy.

The project began in June 2020 and runs through 2022. Under this project, GCHR and the I4C MENA Hub are managing the WeActTogether Campaign, of a key message that 'civil society makes a huge contribution to our societies, and that human rights are an essential right'. The project sheds light on contributions where civil society has excelled in advocating for rights and freedoms while highlighting both the value of civil society as a means for people to express their views and demands. Visit: Actogether.org

This research has been carried out by GCHR with support from the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights (IOHR) and a number of partners. The research aims to analyse the portrayal of CSOs, civil society activists, and journalists in media in three countries - Iraq, Morocco, and Bahrain - the countries in which the WeActTogether campaign is focused.

The research findings are based on a combination of desk reviews, case studies, and interviews. This research focuses on the media aspect of human rights violations and attempts to provide an understanding of the authorities' use of conventional and modern media for intimidation, incitement and spreading hate speech. It also tries to explain how media outlets affiliated with parties and military factions are in the process of further developing their hate speech against protesters, activists and civil society actors.

The study was based on interviews with activists, journalists and directors of human rights and civil institutions, as well as on monitoring media outlets and social media. It also made use of the statements and reports issued by international organisations working to promote freedoms and human rights.

Introduction

In light of the public's perception about civil society in countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, media plays an important role in shaping this perception and influences it. While civil society and human rights defenders' have contributed a lot to their societies, the public's perception is not yet supportive to them. CSOs, human rights defenders, activists, and journalists are facing a narrative that portrays them as foreign servants and traitors.

The role of media in the portrayal of civil society in the MENA cannot be tackled without considering the overall status of freedoms and the civic space in each country, especially freedoms of expression and press, along with media's ownership. In fact, these factors explain how media is used and how the public opinion is influenced, and how its perception is framed through different tactics.

Todd Gitlin¹ defines media frames as "persistent selection, emphasis, and exclusion." He links the concept directly to the production of news discourse by saying that frames "enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely [and to] package the information for efficient relay to their audiences."

¹ Gitlin, T. 1980. *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Overview

One highly contested area in most Arab countries has always been the media. Uncontrolled by national governments, dozens of TV stations and newspapers were founded inside and outside the Arab region with an unprecedented ceiling on freedom of expression and critical coverage of the authorities. Although this media successfully provided platforms for dissenting voices, it was nevertheless incapable of bringing out significant changes in the region. Governments were able to contain the relative freedom of these TV channels, letting them vent bottled-up anger but also gradually re-controlling the large and main media outlets altogether. On the eve of the Arab uprisings in 2011, however, social media had gone beyond the capacity of governments to control.

In the realm of soft power influence, counter-revolutionary authorities discovered the stealth and crucial role of social media, immediately taking rapid efforts towards crippling its role in their countries. As noted by Professor Khaled Hroub, “authoritarian regimes have come to value digital media [and] security services in Bahrain, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria observed how democracy advocates were using social media in Egypt and Tunisia, and they developed counterinsurgency strategies that allowed for surveilling, misleading, and entrapping protesters.” In fact, tactics moved from silencing voices of protest to swamping the media with fake news against activists and deploying “cyber armies” in charge of flooding social media with pro-regime propaganda and creating news trends to cover criminal activities.²

The authorities' heightened patronisation and politicisation of the media was mostly used to exploit the media as tools to mobilise the public and sway public opinion, which strangling journalistic autonomy, freedom, and professionalism. These governments also eroded the public's trust in mainstream media and diminished the latter's credibility. Some of the examples of tightening governmental control over the media landscape in the Arab world include direct and indirect censorship, ownership, sponsorship, and the enforcement of [cybercrime laws](#) which could criminalise any type of content that is not pre-approved or authorised by the regimes. In that way, journalists are at risk of losing their jobs, freedom, or, in some cases, even their lives. Official government media regulatory bodies have also been established to control, screen, and approve the media's content. Thus, the ultimate outcome is to seek alternative platforms for gathering information, in general, and political information, in particular.³

² <https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-resilience-of-civil-societyactivism-and-the-continuous-waves-of-the-arab-spring/>

³ <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/media-use-and-its-anomalies-a-decade-after-the-arab-spring/>

Morocco

CSOs In Morocco, civil society organizations are active, but they are subject to legal harassment, intrusive surveillance, and other impediments to their work, such as judicial control measures in the case of Moroccan professor and journalist Maati Monjib, who was subjected to a travel ban and the withdrawal of his passport. Between January 2017 and July 2018, 16 of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights' (AMDH) events were cancelled, according to Human Rights Watch, either by placing pressure on venue owners or through security forces actively preventing access to event venues. In 2019, access to at least five AMDH events was similarly denied. Furthermore, Amnesty International has been prohibited from doing research in Morocco since 2015.

Similarly, the media develops and diversifies in Morocco. Whereas independent press emerged in the 2000s, today the tendency is going backwards, following a series of trials, severe fines and closures. Control has been regained, either through direct intervention and censure or through selective financing and publicity. As for public media, they are still strongly controlled by central power (albeit not necessarily by the government). The impact of the recent experience of new private radio stations needs to be evaluated over time. For the time being, radio stations are more open towards civil society in its diversity. Themes tackled by the press are restricted by the narrow room to manoeuvre that they operate within. Freedom of speech is limited by "red lines" imposed on all kinds of media (from written press to mass media). There is much room for interpretation of the executive and legal powers in this regard. Numerous prosecutions, severe sentences and closure of independent newspapers are the reflection of the limits to which freedom of speech is subjected and the prominence of monarchic powers.

Moreover, self-censorship is a common practice to avoid both official and informal penalties. A sizable majority (88%) of CSO stakeholders surveyed by the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) said they felt free to express their opinions in public arenas, in focus groups and discussions many noted that they practice self-censorship.⁴

Media Ownership

According to Freedom House, the state dominates the broadcast media, but affluent Moroccans have access to foreign satellite television channels. Although the independent press enjoys a significant degree of freedom when reporting on economic and social policies, the authorities use a number of financial and legal mechanisms to punish critical journalists. The authorities also occasionally disrupt websites and internet platforms. Bloggers are harassed for posting content that offends the monarchy, although many online activists operate anonymously.⁵

⁴ [The State of Civic Freedoms in the Middle East and North Africa, June 2018, by the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law \(ICNL\) in cooperation with Beyond Reform & Development and Menapolis](#)

⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/morocco/freedom-world/2021>

Authorities detained many journalists in 2020 and 2021, all of whom had previously been subjected to government monitoring or prosecution. Soulaïmane Raïssouni, the editor-in-chief of “Akhbar al-Youm”, was detained in May 2020 on sexual assault allegations and remained in custody through the end of the year. Maati Monjib, an “Al-Quds al-Arabi” contributor who has already faced harassment, believed that he was a target of government surveillance, Monjib was arrested in December 2020 on suspicion of money laundering, which has had a significant impact on his activism and everyday life.

Appeals courts upheld the 2018 convictions of a number of journalists related to their coverage of Hirak Rif, and the August 2019 arrest and September sentencing of Moroccan journalist Hajar Raïssouni on charges of allegedly having an abortion and extramarital sex were widely perceived as a reprisal for her journalistic writing about the protest movement.⁶

Hate Speech, Moral Accusations, and Defamation as Tools

Press freedom advocates and family members of detained journalists told the [Committee to Protect Journalists \(CPJ\)](#) in March 2021 that Moroccan authorities are using trumped up sexual assault and “morals” charges to retaliate against these and other journalists for their reporting. And this has instilled a sense of fear among members of the press in a country that already had a reputation for [surveilling](#) and [imprisoning](#) journalists who report critically on the [king](#) or on [protests](#).⁷

In 2018 alone, Moroccan courts ruled against 14,503 people on charges of debauchery, including 3048 people on charges of adultery, 170 on charges of homosexuality and 73 on charges of abortion, according to official figures.⁸

[Hajar Raïssouni](#), who is referenced above, was sentenced to a year in prison for allegedly having sex outside marriage and an illegal abortion; advocates said the conviction was retaliatory for her journalism, according to [news reports](#). She was released on a royal pardon the next month. Her case led to one of the largest campaigns witnessed by the country “Moroccan Outlaws 490” that started as a petition “against the morality police and demanding the legalization of abortion.” It was signed by 490 Moroccans and published in Le Monde in September 2019 in conjunction with the fourth session of the trial of Raïssouni, and was translated and republished on Moroccan sites and collected more than 10,000 supporters.

Newspapers such as “Al-Ahdath” and other news sites bombarded the audience with articles accusing Raïssouni of hypocrisy, moral corruption, and murder. Official defamation through the public and security media has reached such an extent that figures who are not hostile to the regime have become publicly condemning it. In the context of the defamation of the journalist Raïssouni, Muhammad Al-Ash'ari, a former communications minister and a member of the Socialist Union Party that participates in the current government, stated that “there are channels and radio stations that have nothing of the public but the name. The Public Prosecution's statements against defenceless citizens are read to us.”⁹

⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/morocco/freedom-world/2020>

⁷ <https://cpj.org/2021/03/moroccos-new-tactic-punish-journalists-charge-sex-crimes/>

⁸ <https://raseef22.net/article/1075297-moroccan-women-unite-we-are-outlaws>

⁹ <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/80009>

Barlamane is one of the news websites that dedicated their efforts to conduct defamation and hate campaigns against civil society activists in Morocco via articles¹⁰ and its commentary programme presented by Badriya Atallah.¹¹

Similarly, [Maati Monjib](#) was accused of faking his sickness and serving foreign agendas. In its [8th report](#), the MENA Media Monitoring organisation specialised in documenting and monitoring hate speech and defamation against civil society activists and human rights defenders shows more than 32 articles from different media dedicated for defamation against Monjib. Another example is to just type Maati Monjib in the search button of the [Barlamane](#) website, “[Cawalisse](#)”, or “[Al-Ahdath](#)” newspaper to read hundreds of articles criticising the human rights movement and demonising activists with accusations of lying and “[serving the enemies of the country.](#)”

Iraq

Since October 2019, Iraqi authorities have intensified a series of illegal practices which violate local and international laws against citizens, activists and the media, resulting in killing and injuring a number of the actors in the community, as well as a number of others being disappeared, and terrorising individuals in order to silence them or force them into exile.

Between October 2019 and April 2020, the United Nations Office in Baghdad [documented](#) the deaths of close to 487 protesters and 7,715 others injured as a result of excessive violence by Iraqi security forces. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) documented the arrest of about 3,000 people for taking part in demonstrations, as well as 123 activists [subjected](#) to enforced disappearance between 1 October 2019 and 21 March 2020, of whom about 25 are still missing. However, the Iraqi government figures were even higher; former advisor of the Prime Minister, [Hisham Daoud](#), reported that 560 protesters and activists died since 1 October 2019.

The protest movement, which was launched by young people from the most marginalised areas of Baghdad, restored the Iraqis’ hope in bringing change to their worsening reality, which prompted large segments of the population to participate in the protests. Although Iraqi state and non-state actors had already committed grave human rights violations, such abuses both increased and intensified since the protests began.

¹⁰ <https://www.barlamane.com/%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B1/>

¹¹ <http://menamediamonitoring.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%B9-%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%B5%D8%AF-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A9-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%88%D9%82-%D8%A7%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86.pdf>

Iraq has one of the most complex political systems in the Middle East. Despite having the appearances of democracy, such as holding periodic elections and the rotation of presidents, ministers and parliamentarians, the political forces that possess the power in this system which they established after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, routinely violate the constitution. They completely disregard the legislation which they have passed, and sometimes enact laws that belong to the era of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party, which ruled Iraq from 1968 to 2003, in order to terrorise activists and CSOs. Moreover, most of the political parties in power have military factions that act as oppressive forces which support the authorities in terrorising society, activists and CSOs. Against this backdrop, the violations that took place during and since the protests, which were considered the largest in Iraq's modern history, have been perpetrated by identified authorities such as officers from the Ministries of Interior and Defense, as well as parallel armed factions, part of which belonged to the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) or other factions whose leaders and members have not been identified.

The state-sponsored media and parties directly contribute to the escalation of violence, as they play a major role in the dissemination of hate speech against protesters, activists, CSOs and independent media. Furthermore, these outlets promote a narrative that incites against these individuals and actors, and labels them as agents following an "external agenda", or who are "saboteurs", "Ba'athists", "atheists" and "degenerates". Even after members of civil society were killed, partisan media continued to fabricate charges against activists, accusing them of being "traitors" in order to erode the community's sympathy with them, and influence the authorities to cause them not to conduct a transparent investigation into the circumstances of their deaths.

Media Ownership & Roles

- *Conventional Media: Distorting Facts*

A large number of media outlets operate in Iraq, both conventional and modern. However, few media outlets receive funding without political agenda, and are run by independent staff. The media discourse of Iraq's political forces is divided across the sectarian-nationalist spectrum, reflecting the power-sharing in the political system: Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds. Accordingly, those media outlets follow a sectarian-based discourse (Shiite vs. Sunni) or a nationalist one in the case of Kurds. Shiite forces, which dominate the majority of parliament seats, own the largest number of Arabic-speaking TV channels and newspapers, belonging to the Islamic Radios and Televisions Union (IRTVU), which includes dozens of Iranian-funded media organisations. This coalition is followed by the Sunni forces, and the media which are controlled by Kurdish political forces, which is Kurdish-speaking for the most part.

Satellite TV channels affiliated with or close to Iraqi armed parties and factions are linked to the IRTVU, which was established in 2007 for what it calls "countering the misleading and tendentious media campaign by the enemies of Islam, and conducting a correct and comprehensive reorientation campaign." The Union comprises 210 media organisations including satellite TV channels, radio stations, websites and production corporations. It exerts its influence in 35 countries, and broadcasts materials in several languages, most notably Arabic, Persian and English. Political agendas play a major role in building discourses in the media and influence press coverage of social and civil society events. Therefore, the coverage undertaken by such outlets is not always impartial, and falls into the traps of either expressing utter support for a given event, or to the contrary, causing them to take a stance against the event or the persons involved.

Media outlets can also be divided into conventional media and the so-called "cyber armies".. Conventional media consist of: satellite TV channels, newspapers, news agencies and radio stations. A number of these media are active on social media, particularly on Facebook and Twitter. Many also have channels on Telegram, which is the platform where much incitement and hate speech took place against activists and CSOs, through channels affiliated with parties and armed groups.

There are no statistics on the number of media outlets in Iraq which encompass all forms of media, nor on the number of viewers of TV channels, or radio listeners and followers of news sites. In any case, the professional and ethical standards of these conventional media are highly questionable, as they broadcast TV programmes and reports which incite against persons who express views opposing those of the authorities. Moreover, they spread fake news about activists and CSOs, and go to great lengths to even forge documents in order to tarnish the image of activists in addition to civil and rights associations.¹²

These conventional media outlets did much instigation during and after the 2019 demonstrations in Iraq, and produced a narrative which accused protesters of "subservience" to the US Embassy, in addition to countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in addition to accusing them of being "Ba'athists".

Some channels labelled all of the demonstrators "*Al-Jokeriyeh*" [The Jokers]¹³, which is intended to imply that the demonstrators follow the instructions of the US Embassy and carry out its agenda. These channels accused the demonstrators of killing members of the security forces, spreading atheism and debauchery, and said that they were [offering alcohol](#) in the squares where demonstrations and gatherings took place.

Channels such as "Al-'Ahd" [The Vow] affiliated with the "Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq" [League of the Righteous] militia; "Afaq" [Horizons] channel affiliated with the "Da'wa Party" [The Islamic Call]; "Al-Nujaba" channel affiliated with Al-Nujaba' Militia [God's Nobles]; "Al-Ittijah" [Direction] affiliated with "Hizbullah Brigades"; "Al-Anwar 2" [Lights 2] owned by Shiite cleric Sadiq Al-Husseini Al-Shirazi, inter alia, distort the facts and make accusations against demonstrators, activists and CSOs without being held accountable by the National Communications and Media Commission of Iraq (NCMC), which is the entity responsible for monitoring content and preventing hate speech and violence.

Dozens of news articles and video reports broadcasted on these channels' websites were identified. The broadcasted content clearly violates the rules¹⁴ set by the NCMC, yet these channels were not held accountable.

¹² An interview with Mustafa Nasser, President of the Press Freedom Advocacy Association, April 27, 2021.

¹³ Some activists in Iraq posted a photo of the Joker movie's main character on their social media accounts. This was used by partisan media as a basis for accusing Iraqi protesters of ridiculous charges, due to the destructive tendency which was depicted in the film. The film, which was among the highest grossing films and gained widespread popularity in Iraq, coincided with the outbreak of protests. It focused on social and economic marginalisation experienced by an individual, which pushes him towards rebellion against the authorities. The media outlets which were opposing the demonstrations considered some activists posting Joaquin Phoenix's photo as conclusive evidence of their involvement in acts of vandalism that occurred during the protests.

¹⁴ Article II (4/a) of [The Media Broadcasting Rules](#) issued in 2019 stipulates that media outlets shall "give a balanced description of events, and broadcast news in a professional manner without additions or implications which may adversely affect the facts. Media outlets shall also observe using an appropriate tone when

As a matter of fact, the NCMC, an entity that is supposedly independent, aligns its stance with media outlets that incite against demonstrators and civil society activists, and does not subject them to any rules. On the contrary, it threatens and shuts down channels that cover demonstrations in a professional and balanced manner. For example, the NCMC [shut down](#) nine local, Arab and international channels operating in Iraq, and issued an ultimatum to five others. Moreover, it shut down four local radio stations, in connection with their coverage of the October 2019 demonstrations.

The IRTVU [adopted](#) the aforementioned term “*Al-Jokeriyeh*” to refer to Iraqi demonstrators, and a number of Union-member media outlets, particularly Iranian ones, participated extensively in the instigation campaign against demonstrations in Iraq.

- ***Social Media: More Incitement***

Incitement against protests and activists on social media intensified without any ethical controls. The widely-known term “cyber armies” refers to bloggers, journalists and content creators who are sponsored by parties and military factions, and produce videos, posters and posts that attack their benefactors’ opponents. Because the protests, activists and CSOs are considered to be a threat to the media financier’s political and security authority, “cyber armies” relentlessly campaign against them. Inciting content can be found on thousands of accounts and posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as Telegram. Some content is sponsored in order to ensure that it reaches broad segments of society.

The said images rely on fabricating trumped up charges by using the social media pages of their targets as a source of information. Images and posts are extracted from their accounts, then false and inciting information is built around them. Some content has been executed in such an impressive manner, to the extent that many members of the community can be misled by it.

Due to the magnitude of the inciting content created during and after the October 2019 protests, covering its entirety is an almost impossible undertaking. What distinguishes social media posts is that they have a more direct approach to inciting against activists. These posts have intimidated a large number of activists and forced them into hiding for a while because incitement means that the person has been identified as a target and could be subjected to an assassination attempt.¹⁵

Indeed, a number of incitement incidents by the media and social media platforms of parties and armed factions were followed by assassinations and enforced disappearances, in addition to arrests in accordance with laws passed under the authoritarian Ba’ath regime formerly led by Saddam Hussein. For example, in 2020, activist [Riham Ya’acoub](#), researcher [Hisham Al-Hashimi](#) and activist [Tahseen Osama](#) were assassinated at the hands of unknown assailants, after months of defamation and incitement against them by Iraqi and Iranian media outlets and social media platforms.

broadcasting news, free from agitation and incitement.” Article (II/4/b) states that the Commission shall “Ensure the media’s compliance by avoiding the use of images, image equivalents or audio recordings, which carry direct or indirect accusations to certain persons or entities of involvement in a particular event or case without ascertaining their credibility.”

¹⁵ An interview conducted by the researcher at IOHR with two activists and a journalist, who preferred to remain anonymous, between 29 March and 1 May 2021.

Moreover, activist [Sajjad Al-Iraqi](#) was forcibly disappeared during the same year, after facing a torrent of incitement and defamation.

Character Assassination & the Anti-Terrorism Law as Tools

Orchestrated media attacks against the protest movement and its members as well as supportive CSOs often employ character assassination¹⁶ against social actors by labelling them with stigma such as “foreign agents”, or accusing them of violating the “prevailing moral standards” of the society through attempting to “incite debauchery” or insulting a religion or a sect. Women activists on the other hand often face accusations of outraging “public decency” and of unchaste conduct.

For the first time since the inception of the new government in Iraq after 2003, armed factions have applied new methods of silencing activists. Rather than killing them, those factions would kidnap a number of activists for several days, during which forced confessions are recorded, such as receiving foreign funds or conspiring with neighbouring countries to destabilise the situation in Iraq. Armed factions went even further by labelling women activists as “prostitutes”, through forced confessions. Only activist [Mary Mohammed](#) spoke out about this new way of terrorising and silencing activists. Moreover, two activists who now reside abroad, confirmed that they were forced to make recorded confessions at gunpoint,¹⁷ but they did not disclose what it is that they were forced to say.

The authorities called the armed factions that carried out kidnappings and killings “third parties”, and formed committees to have them identified, in addition to repeatedly reaffirming their respect for the right to demonstrate. However, this appeared to be nothing more than an attempt to separate themselves from being associated with these factions. The former spokesperson of Adel Abdul Mahdi’s government confirmed that the government was dealing with the demonstrators in accordance with article (4) of the Anti-Terrorism Act, which is notorious for its loose wording. The Iraqi judiciary remained silent until the end of November 2019, when the Court of Cassation declared its verdict against the use of this law to hold protesters accountable, and decided that the applicable legislation is the Penal Code no. 111 of 1969.

The Penal Code, which has undergone minor amendments over the years, also has loose wording which violates international guarantees to the right to freedom of expression and assembly. The Penal Code enshrines numerous vague defamation crimes, such as insulting “the Arab Nation” or any government official, irrespective of whether a statement is true or not, according to [Human Rights Watch](#).

The Penal Code was used to arrest activists for Facebook posts that were critical of officials. For example, [activists](#) from central and southern Iraqi provinces were arrested for Facebook posts on charges of “insulting the state”. An activist was sentenced to **two years in prison** in accordance with article 226 of the Iraqi Penal Code, which relates to insulting the state and the courts because he questioned and scrutinised the unlawful distribution of land among judges!

¹⁶ According to “The Routledge Handbook of Character Assassination and Reputation Management”, character assassination includes, but is not limited to, the use of stigma, stereotypes and taboos, the implicit or explicit appeals to morality, the mixing of truth and falsehood, and direct insults. Published in 2020 by Routledge, 52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017.

¹⁷ Interview by telephone with activists, who refused to give their names, on 3 May 2021.

In addition to the two above-mentioned laws, the Iraqi authorities are seeking to enact the “Cyber Crimes Act”, which could threaten freedom of expression at the social level. . For example, article 3 stipulates that deliberately using a computer and the internet with the intention of “undermining the country's independence, unity, integrity or its economic, political, military or higher security interests”, or “participating, negotiating, promoting, contracting or dealing with a hostile entity in any manner with the intention of undermining security and public order or endangering the country” are punishable by a prison sentence up to life imprisonment and a hefty fine. These offences are in fact identical with the accusations made by the authorities’ media outlets against activists in Iraq.

Civil Society Organisations: Biased Media

Against this backdrop, it was necessary to have discussions with representatives of civil and human rights organisations in order to explore their views on the media, and whether it is perceived to have covered their activities in a fair manner, and also to ascertain if they were targeted by any campaigns that posed a threat to their work or their lives.

Four organisations operating in Iraq agreed that media outlets in Iraq cover their activities according to the agenda of their financier, which is often a political party or an armed faction. Only one organisation reported having experienced good coverage. Mustafa Sa’adoun, Director of the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, said: “Media outlets affiliated with parties and armed groups, or Arab and international outlets affiliated with other states and institutions, have all been reporting on our activities. Nevertheless, official state outlets and those belonging to parties and militias would certainly not broadcast or post any reports that are hostile or detrimental to the interests of the financier. It can be said that it was positive coverage overall.”

Mustafa Nasser, President of the Press Freedom Advocacy Association identified other factors impacting press coverage of civil society activities in Iraq, including “personal connections” and “common interests”, features that violate the professional principles in media coverage. Nasser said: “Media coverage of the organisations' events depends on two factors, the first is the organisation's personal contacts with journalists, and the second is common interests, such as the journalist having a particular interest in a project that an organisation implements or the fact that it directly impacts him or is of relevance to his own agenda. Some organisations even pay certain journalists in order to have them cover their activities, which most actors would consider inconsistent with the objectives these organisations work for, and may be considered immoral by some.”

Nibras Al-Ma’mouri, President of the Iraqi Women Journalists Forum, goes further and basically concludes that there are no professional media institutions in Iraq: “The lack of decent media institutions that operate independently and with a national agenda was a challenge for us, especially since many of these institutions perceive the work of civil society organisations as something that ought to be suppressed rather than promoted, particularly when it comes to women who defend human rights and women's issues.”

All surveyed organisations confirmed that they have been targeted by campaigns through conventional and social media. The campaigns were aimed either at tarnishing their image, weakening their credibility or forcing them to remain silent and impeding their work which is critical of the various authorities.

Nasser said that the Press Freedom Advocacy Association faced an “instigation campaign” orchestrated by “Afaq” and “Al-Ahd” channels, as well as some social media pages, in which the Association’s name was explicitly mentioned, and it was accused of receiving funds from the White House, and being involved in the soft warfare led by the US in Iraq.

Nibras Al-Ma’mouri said that the Iraqi Women Journalists Forum “faced a large volume of instigation campaigns through media outlets and social media.” This came as a result of the Forum being involved with women's careers in media, and also due to it having demanded a “women’s quota” be set in the Iraqi Media Network, the independent body responsible for managing semi-official newspapers, magazines, radio stations and satellite TV channels, where professional posts and leadership positions are male-dominated.

Sa’adoun pointed out that the Observatory faced “many campaigns carried out by persons or small groups that are religiously or politically motivated or even have their own media considerations.” The accusations are “acting as foreign agents, loyalty to the foreigner, subservience, etc.” [Salloum](#) added that “Masarat was subjected to social media campaigns and some posts that tarnish its image were communicated to the media outlets”.

All organisations agreed that they prefer their activities to be covered by independent media, but often use social media platforms to promote their activities, reports and campaigns, as confirmed by Saadoun, Nasser, Al-Ma’amouri and Salloum.

Bahrain

In a country classified as closed, according to [CIVICUS Monitor for tracking civic space](#), CSOs are prohibited from operating without a permit in Bahrain, and authorities have broad discretion to deny or revoke permits. The government also reserves the right to replace the boards of CSOs. Bahraini human rights defenders and their family members are subject to harassment, intimidation, and prosecution. Many of them were either in prison or in exile for many years.¹⁸

As CSOs cannot operate free from government interference, many chose not to register because of the overly-restrictive CSO law which empowers the authorities to intervene directly in the internal affairs and activities of these organisations.¹⁹ The main human rights CSO Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) was banned in 2004 and Nabeel Rajab, its founder and President, was released on probation in June 2020, having been in detention since 2016.

Ranking 169/180 according to the Reporters Without Borders 2020 World Press Freedom Index, Bahrain is considered to be ruled with an iron fist by the monarchy. The country is notorious for jailing many journalists, especially photographers and camerapersons. Fear that it could be overthrown led to the authorities to increase their persecution and censorship of dissidents and protesters from 2011 onwards, especially after the popular movement in the country.²⁰

¹⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-world/2020>

¹⁹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2021/05/ACT3060112017ARABIC.pdf>

²⁰ <https://rsf.org/en/bahrain>

Journalists face legal and bureaucratic obstacles to their work in practice. The authorities have refused to renew the credentials of several Bahraini journalists working with foreign media outlets. Six journalists remained behind bars as of late 2020, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, and one imprisoned journalist was temporarily moved to solitary confinement in April 2020 after he shared a video in which he disputed official claims about measures being taken to protect prisoners from COVID-19. International journalists often face difficulties obtaining a visa to enter Bahrain.

This could be attributed to high levels of apathy, repression, and authoritarianism that lead to equally high levels of self-censorship which, in turn, hamper the expression of oppositional political views out of fear of regime retaliation.

Media Ownership

Bahrain has no independent media and the media ecosystem in the country has been primarily shaped by the security interests of the ruling family. The Bahraini government owns all national broadcast media outlets, and the private owners of Bahrain's main newspapers have close ties to the state. The only independent newspaper, "Al-Wasat", was banned in 2017. Self-censorship is encouraged by the vaguely worded Press Law, which allows the state to imprison journalists for criticising the king or Islam or for threatening national security.²¹

By 2011, six of Bahrain's seven daily newspapers were owned by pro-government Bahrainis or those affiliated with the royal family. This, of course, has resulted in a lack of editorial diversity. Indeed, one archaic regulation of Bahrain's Press Law is that those who run a newspaper should be of "good character." Such subjective terminology essentially means that only those approved by the ministry will be granted such permission.²²

With the closing down of "Al-Wasat" in Bahrain, a significant number of Bahrain's most circulated English and Arabic language papers, including the "Gulf Daily News", "Al-Ayam", and "Akhbar Al-Khaleej", are owned by only two companies. While privately-owned, they are still subject to the state's tight control. The five main terrestrial channels are operated by the Bahrain Radio and Television Corporation (BRTC), while most radio stations are also state-owned, private channels such as the South Asian Hindi station and Your FM.²³

A 2016 edict requires newspapers to apply for a one-year renewable licence to publish online. The government selectively blocks online content, including independent websites (such as [BahrainMirror](#)) and content that criticises religion or highlights human rights abuses.²⁴

Journalists and citizen-journalists convicted on charges such as participating in demonstrations, property destruction and supporting terrorism are given long jail terms and sometimes even life sentences. Many have been mistreated in detention and some have even been stripped of their citizenship.

²¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-world/2021>

²² <https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0238/ch9.xhtml>

²³ Same as above

²⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-world/2021>

Since 2016, Bahraini journalists working for international media have had problems renewing their accreditation. For foreign journalists, getting a press visa to visit Bahrain is very complicated.²⁵

Internet and Surveillance

The media context in Bahrain cannot be fully understood without tackling internet freedom, which is still restricted until now, and surveillance. While TV, radio, and the local press have been leveraged as a means of distributing state propaganda and public relations, the rise of citizen journalism, social media, and de-spatialised technologies has prompted some resistance to this top-down media-assisted authoritarianism, but the authorities have adapted to instrumentalise these new technologies as tools of surveillance.

Authorities continued to block websites and force the removal of online content, particularly social media posts criticising the government in 2021, according to [Freedom House](#). After the government normalised relations with Qatar, some websites were unblocked, but many online news outlets remained inaccessible, including Al-Jazeera. Social media users were interrogated by security forces for their posts, and citizens were arrested and jailed for content posted online. The Ministry of the Interior (MOI) continued to dissuade internet users from discussing sensitive topics online, such as the decision to normalise relations with Israel. Journalists and activists who work online, including those abroad, continued to face extra-judicial intimidation, cyberattacks, and surveillance by state authorities.²⁶

According to [Freedom House](#), several reports have documented the government's use of spyware against dissidents. In October 2018, it was revealed that Bahrain had purchased espionage and intelligence-gathering software from private companies, including a system from Israeli company Verint used for collecting information from social networks, and that Bahraini intelligence officers were trained in their use.

In a 2018 report by Citizen Lab, a Canadian internet watchdog, Bahrain is listed as one of 45 countries worldwide in which devices were breached by Pegasus, a targeted spyware software developed by the NSO Group, an Israeli technology firm. Bahraini human rights defenders and journalists were among those who had their devices attacked and WhatsApp data stolen. A report by Citizen Lab and Red Line for Gulf published in August 2021 revealed that the Bahraini government had [used Pegasus to hack](#) the iPhones of three unnamed members of BCHR, four unnamed political activists, photojournalist Moosa Abd-Ali (also known as Moosa Mohammed) and blogger Yusuf Al-Jamri between June 2020 and February 2021. In March 2018, it was reported that Bahrain purchased 204,000 dinars' (\$544,000) worth of British surveillance equipment between 2015 and 2017. In July 2020, a new report also listed Bahrain as a customer of UK spyware.²⁷

²⁵ <https://rsf.org/en/bahrain>

²⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-net/2021>

²⁷ Same as above

Intimidation, Blackout, Demonising and Defamation

Since 2016 especially, [dissidents](#) – including political activists and leaders, human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, and peaceful protesters – have faced growing repression, including threats, summons, travel bans, arrests, interrogations, and prison sentences.²⁸

The authorities continued to target all forms of political and civic opposition through the expansion of arbitrary detention, fabricated charges and show trials, denaturalisation and travel bans, intimidation and death threats, the torture of detainees, and reprisals against human rights defenders who cooperate with international organisations. In 2017, the country began steps to carry out the death sentence against three torture victims convicted after deeply flawed trials. The domestic intelligence agency has made increasing use of arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, torture, and the mistreatment of human rights defenders and civil society and political activists.²⁹

Human rights activists were harassed at times through threats via anonymous phone calls, abusive messages, and calls and text messages they received on their mobile phones. For example, Nabeel Rajab, President of BCHR, was harassed and pursued by security officials in civilian clothes and in cars without any badges. On 19 July 2005, he was physically assaulted by policemen while participating in a peaceful demonstration in solidarity with the unemployed. His wife, Sumaya, was the target of a smear campaign in 2005 and 2006, and was reportedly denied promotion to her position at the Ministry of Transport, apparently because of her husband's activities.³⁰

Moreover, Bahraini human rights defenders and activists are blacked out to a certain extent in local media outlets. News articles rarely speak about these activists or their achievements. A user can hardly try to search for any names of the human rights defenders in “Akhbar Al-Khaleej” newspaper, but no major articles would be found.

The state-owned media when tackling human rights defenders’ issues uses two tactics: praising the government³¹ through creating counter narratives to local and international human rights groups and demonising them, or portraying these defenders as “terrorists”, “outlaws”, “puppets”, “servants of foreign agendas”, “liars”, “enemies of the country” ... The first tactic highlights the pro-government organisations’ discourse to the extent of pushing relatives of some defenders to speak against them. Samira Rajab, a cousin of Nabeel Rajab who is a journalist, politician and former [Minister of State](#) for Information, addressed a letter to the “New York Times” in 2015, accusing him of spreading fake news about his country.³²

Another article by “[Al-Watan](#)” Newspaper covering a statement for the President of Arab Parliament accused Human Rights Watch and other human rights organisations of spreading misleading information and “politicised reports [to] serve the foreign agendas of terrorist and extremist organisations that target the security and stability of Arab countries.”

²⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/02/bahrain-dreams-of-reform-crushed-10-years-after-uprising/>

²⁹ <https://cihrs.org/arab-region-annual-report-2017-2018/?lang=en>

³⁰ <https://www.refworld.org/es/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain/opendocpdf.pdf?reldoc=y&docid=49b8d9b42>

³¹ <http://www.akhbar-alkhaleej.com/news/article/1234267>

³² <http://www.akhbar-alkhaleej.com/13537/article/17694.html>

This newspaper also has multiple opinion articles dedicated to targeting human rights defenders in Bahrain. One [article](#) referred to Loujain Al-Hathloul, a Saudi human rights defender, labelling her as “a puppet created by foreign countries and then being called a human rights activist” of which the same applies to Bahraini human rights defenders Nabeel Rajab and [Zaynab Al-Khawaja](#). The article used the initials of the latter two without mentioning their full names, while other articles by other writers clearly mentioned their names. Another [article](#) described Nabeel Rajab as “a person who deludes people that he is a defender of human rights, and that he is a neutral person and is not racist in his presentation.”

Findings and Conclusions

Examining conventional media sponsored by governments, parties, armed factions and “cyber armies” in Morocco, Iraq and Bahrain demonstrates that much of the disseminated material not only leads to “character assassination” but may also in a country such as Iraq be an indication that assassination of activists may shortly follow.

The interviews undertaken by the research for this report revealed that activists and CSOs rely heavily on solidarity among themselves to ward off the fabricated accusations against them and to repel the intense content labelling them as “traitors” and “debauchers”.

The lack of local independent media outlets allows the wider spread of narratives and hate speech against civil society and human rights defenders, which makes it harder to counter without independent media, although international media play a role in countering the narrative, but remains insufficient to drive people to support CSOs, especially if there were accessibility limitations.

Organisations and activists do not rely on the security services to protect them from threats and the implications of incitement they face, especially since the authorities are often aligned with the attitudes opposing activists. Furthermore, cyber security in the region is still lagging behind, and charges of the dangers of hateful or harmful content on social media platforms are not taken seriously.

It is with no doubt that the current structure of media ownership in these three countries, that reflects the status of several other countries in the MENA region, along with the local contexts related to freedom of press and expression, shape the media content about civil society and human rights defenders.

After extensive desk research, we were unable to find encouraging media reporting examples that sufficiently highlight the work of activists and CSOs in the MENA countries generally and the three countries particularly. This increases the need for independent, free and diverse media that would allow the voice of civil society to be heard, and why a campaign such as WeActTogether is so timely.