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States' Friend or Foe?

The Critical Role of Media in the Middle East

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Executive Summary

Ethan Dinçer

Since the onset of the Arab Spring in 2010, the world has been a viewer of so-called guerilla journalism, watching Middle Eastern and North African regimes topple all from the smartphones of protesters and activists. From Syrians documenting the government's atrocities on an iPhone to social media uniting activists in Egypt, the role of the media in recent Middle Eastern political history is significant. Today, mass mobilisations and protests are largely communicated to the outside world through media of all levels, whether it be a WhatsApp message to family and friends abroad or the use of a VPN to access information blocked by a state. However, the media is not solely a vehicle of positive social change – repressive and authoritarian states across the Middle East region continue brutal suppression of the media, whether it be shutting down publications, jailing journalists, or surveilling citizens abroad.

This report, the inaugural of London Politica's Middle East Programmme, scrutinises the past and present of media in the Middle East. Focusing chiefly on highlighting the intersections between the media and local, regional, and international geopolitics, this report aims to unveil the complex legal, political, and activist landscapes behind the region's media. Employing a case study approach, we examine 5 states – Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Türkiye – and offer critical analysis of their media pasts, presents, and futures.

Each case study employs a context-specific approach to understanding media landscapes. From jailed journalists in Türkiye to Iran's post-revolutionary control of the media to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, our analysts trace a trajectory of the media, from historical media legislation to contemporary conflicts and the politics surrounding them. Each country profile features an overview of recent critical legislation relating to the media, the role of the media in political turmoil and turnover, and the future of the media.

Taking an intentionally broad approach to defining media, this report offers nuanced and precise analysis on some of the region's most pressing conflicts. We end with a series of reflections for international stakeholders, policymakers, and activists on how to approach an increasingly turbulent media landscape. Though the future might seem contradictory and challenging to navigate, this report aims to clarify opacities and support a more inclusive media future in the Middle East.

Media in Egypt: Strategies and Changes amid Domestic and Regional Instabilities

Hassan Kabalan & Guido Larocca

The New Media and Mubarak's State Strategy

The role of media subordination to political authorities in Egypt is not new, dating back to Gamal Abdel Nasser's era. A notorious example of the use of media as a propaganda tool was the radio show Voice of the Arabs, infamous during the Six Day War when it announced fictional Egyptian victories when Egyptian forces suffered a staggering defeat. Since then, the role of Egyptian media hasn't changed significantly, as the authorities have controlled it. For this reason, social media has been a disruptive force on the Egyptian media landscape, as one space where the state, despite its repressive efforts, still can't exert the same level of control as it does on traditional media.

Hosni Mubarak's government, like other totalitarian governments, recognized the internet's significant benefit to socioeconomic growth, the development of the state services, and its power to bring Egypt closer to the West and strengthen its regional standing. The adoption of the internet was also considered as having the ability to enhance the government's reputation as more tolerant and welcoming of the social and political transformations symbolised by the internet. As a result, the government encouraged the internet's development and growth in Egypt, and it became available to the general public in the 1990s. Egypt enjoyed a high level of internet freedom in the early 2000s, relative to other Arab countries. Unlike other regional countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt seemed to have no strict means of controlling or filtering internet access. With the exception of a few rare cases, such as blocking the Muslim Brotherhood's webpage in 2004, hardly any websites were censored during this period. Such relative tolerance complemented Egypt's political openness since the early 2000s, as a result of pressure from the US to initiate a phase of political and economic reforms in the country. This involved the release of previously prohibited literature as well as documents demonstrating electoral fraud. As a result, the internet acted as a safe haven for opposition figures, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. With the advent of the internet, the Muslim Brotherhood was among the first organisations in Egypt to establish websites, starting in 1998 with a page for its print newspaper Al-Dawah. Other websites linked to the organisation were established in subsequent years, but kept the link hidden, purportedly for security considerations. These websites largely concentrated on Islamic themes and general Islamist political matters. By the early 2000s, the organisation was experimenting with overtly political websites, including Egyptwindow.net in 2002 and the first official website Ikhwanonline.net in 2003, which was one of Egypt's most visited sites.

The second generation of internet, known as Web 2.0, emerged in the mid-2000s, allowing its users to develop independent material, swiftly publish it and engage with other users. This

innovation encouraged higher political activism, as well as swift interaction between individuals and the potential to build and identify communities with similar goals.

As Alice McAuliffe explains; "Web 2.0 has allowed for new forms of community, communication, collaboration, participation, and organising – all key components that make up successful activism." Within a few years, a substantial virtual community of blogs emerged in Egypt as one of the first manifestations of this transition, significantly influencing the public agenda. Bloggers developed "citizen journalism," which means that they became a source of news for events that other media outlets did not cover, such as sexual assault, prisoner abuse, and police brutality. Bloggers broke taboos by aggressively denouncing the government and exposing its corruption and fraud. They also exerted significant civic influence, becoming an integral element of the country's political activism even before the emergence of Facebook and Twitter. One important case is Kifaya (Enough), an anti-regime political movement established in 2004, which inspired the first generation of bloggers. The rise of activist blogging in Egypt is connected to the Kifaya National Movement for Change, a decentralised grassroots, all-encompassing movement that started campaigning for human, civil, and political rights and reform in December 2004. Indeed, if Kifaya provided the political space for opposition forces, blogs served as a platform for Kifaya's mobilisation. Bloggers thus not only began to challenge the official version of events, exposing a wide range of violations by Egyptian authorities, but they have also urged other activists to their cause by promoting Kifaya protests which were often ignored by mainstream media.

As these movements began turning online activism into street demonstrations, like Kifaya's demonstration in 2004, Mubarak's regime switched to a strategy of de-liberalisation, imposing limits on freedom of speech, including restrictions on the digital space. Abdalla F Hassan, for instance, argues that "social media have become a free arena for ideas and political discourse in Egypt, but the security-minded state intervened when it became a way to organise politically". Therefore, after roughly a decade of relative liberalisation, the government started restricting the internet by seizing enterprises that offered internet services. In 2004, the state established a new body, the Department to Combat Crime of Computer and Internet, to crack down on subversive websites and has imprisoned developers, journalists, and human rights advocates for breaking censorship rules. The government also disrupted internet access or and shut down certain apps, as well as intimidating, arresting, and abusing online bloggers and oppositionists, all of which were supported by state institutions. Nevertheless, the regime's authoritarian methods for dealing with the challenge posed by the internet were obsolete and ineffectual and failed to regulate online debate and information flow. Even if an activist was jailed, another blogger immediately emerged, as the regime was not dealing with just a few opposition figures, but thousands.

The Arab Spring & Mubarak's Overthrow

Unsurprisingly, the popular movement that led to Mubarak's overthrow occurred before the state had managed to restrict the influence of the Web 2.0. As some authors have already

examined extensively, the protests that erupted on January 25, 2011 were coordinated and planned on Facebook pages; hence, new media contributed to the unfolding of events, acting as a catalyst and as auxiliary tools. On the local level, activists used social media to articulate the uprising's aims, propagate its slogans, articulate its objectives, mobilise protestors, while offering evidence of what was transpiring on the ground, in contrast to what they believed was the state's misleading narrative. On a global scale, activists communicated to the rest of the world the events in Egypt and used it to urge Western countries, particularly the United States, to exert pressure on Mubarak to step down.

The government reacted by shutting down the internet and cellular networks across Egypt, considering these new media tools as a threat to its survival. However, such attempts failed to put an end to the demonstrations, which continued and even expanded. The new media thus played a significant role in facilitating the revolution as the government was unable to devise pertinent and efficient means to cope with it.

After the overthrow of President Mubarak, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) governed the country in a transitional phase (February 2011-June 2012). Hopes were initially raised for greater freedom of expression, as the media landscape saw an unparalleled increase in the number of independent TV stations, newspapers, and webpages, as the Ministry of Information was also scrapped. However, both the interim government of the SCAF and the ensuing regime of the Muslim Brotherhood led by Mohammad Morsi tried to restrain the new media. While the government sought to suppress online dissent, cyber-activism remained a threat to the authority, for instance by uncovering and documenting infringements of human rights by the state.

Following Morsi's overthrow in June 2013, the new regime led by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi initially allowed relatively uncensored internet activity. As a consequence, the digital world remained the only means available to articulate an alternative narrative that resisted both extremes—the government and the Muslim Brotherhood—and exposed state corruption, brutality, and human rights abuses. Since the government had closed down all of the Muslim Brotherhood's media outlets throughout Egypt, the organisation used the internet to confront the regime from exile (particularly from Türkiye), releasing recordings detailing abuse of power among the ruling elites and promoting violence against the regime. Likewise, other political activists were also using the internet to convey criticism and dissidence against the state that were not mentioned in other media tools.

Contemporary Media Politics

In recent years, though, the government in Egypt has advanced to the stage of controlling the space of the new media. Sisi's regime started operating with increased sophistication, using precautionary measures and coercive techniques that are more deterring. In 2018, to describe the growing governmental control over the media landscape, Journalists Without Borders coined the term "media Sisification", to refer to President Sisi’s attempts to “to adopt a set of laws to reshuffle the media landscape and extend his powers on it, both in the public and the

private sectors". As in many other nations, the government (and its adversaries) have adopted techniques to control the narrative, by generating internet content, such as human trolls to influence online debates on issues concerning the regime's legitimacy and stability. For instance, experts suggest that bots were heavily employed in Egypt's presidential elections in 2018. In these digital battles, pro-regime trolls have had the advantage, controlling over 70% of the hashtags, compared to only approximately 5% held by the regime's adversaries. Surveillance and censorship of websites have also become frequent in recent years.

The yearly "Freedom of the Net" reports from Freedom House show that since 2016, internet freedom in Egypt has been steadily declining, meanwhile "digital authoritarianism" has been increasing. Egyptians experience difficulties and disruptions when attempting to access websites, notably during anti-government demonstrations like those that occurred in September 2019. There have also been reported cases of content restrictions and user rights violations. As Noha Fathy observed, the "tight grip of the government on the digital space" is exhibited in both legal instruments and the "internet architecture," employing strict laws, content filtering, repression, and surveillance of online communication to the extent that online activists self-censor and avoid violating the state law. Unsurprisingly, Egypt was among the five nations out of the 65 surveyed in 2020 with the least degree of internet freedom. However, the large anti-Sisi demonstrations that broke out in September 2019 after provocative and defamatory videos went viral demonstrated that the Egyptian government was not totally completely immune from the challenge new media presents to its authority. The videos, which were published by an Egyptian expatriate, accused al-Sisi and the military of corruption and overspending on lavish real estate projects. Despite the government's efforts to limit exposure, oppositional content succeeds in infiltrating the public realm, compelling the government's sympathisers to react to the online debate.

The current legal framework for media regulation was created in 2016 with the passing of a law that created three new bodies: The Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR), National Press Council (NPC) and the National Media Council (NMC). The SCMR is the most important of these bodies, and the others respond to the SCMR. This is because it has unlimited power over any media in Egypt and can be considered the main executive body for controlling and censoring media. Some of its competencies include controlling the publication or broadcasting of media from outside Egypt under national security considerations and revoking the licences of TV stations, newspapers, and websites.

The 2016 law was amended in 2018, and the most significant change in the amendment was the introduction of new regulations on social media. The SMCR is responsible for applying the law, which considers social media accounts with more than 5000 followers as media outlets, thereby subjecting them to prosecution if they publish what Egyptian authorities consider "fake news." The amendment has been called a mere codification of already existing repressive practices against the media. This observation seems accurate, as dozens of websites were blocked two years before the amendment, and social media users were prosecuted because of their online activity.

Another form of control over media is the takeover of TV channels and newspapers by companies related to the intelligence services. This practice has been common since El Sisi

came to power in 2013, with at least 3 TV stations bought by businessmen that were either former military intelligence officers or known to be close to El Sisi and the intelligence services. But the Egyptian government's policy on media is not only a domestic affairs issue. The imprisonment of journalists has caused concerns in the West, particularly in the EU, and Egyptian animosity against Al Jazeera has a strong geopolitical component influenced by the Qatari-Egyptian rivalry.

The state control of media is not limited to political content; there is also morally motivated censorship related to cultural norms. State authorities exert control over the content that they deem inappropriate or that goes against Egyptian moral customs and values. Recently the SCMR contacted streaming platforms Netflix and Disney requiring the removal of content that they deemed contradictory with Islamic values and Egyptian traditions. In 2018 the SMRC stopped broadcasting the American comedy show Saturday Night Live, citing inappropriate sexual implications. On another occasion where the SCMR acted on the grounds of morality, a TV anchor was put under investigation for making a commentary about the natality of Upper Egyptians, which the SMCR considered insulting.

Media and Geopolitics

Egypt's relationship with the news outlet Al Jazeera can't be separated from its relations with Qatar. Egyptian authorities regard the Qatar-based news station as a representative of Qatari interests. The bilateral relationship deteriorated rapidly after the 2013 coup that brought El Sisi into power. Since then, the Qatari-based network has been a frequent target for Egyptian authorities. The main point of friction between Egypt and Qatar was the latter's support of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's most important Islamist organisation and a fierce enemy of the El Sisi regime.

After the 2013 coup d'etat against the Brotherhood-affiliated president Mohammed Morsi, Qatar became a safe haven for exiled Egyptian Islamists. And even more irritating for Egyptian authorities, Al Jazeera broadcasted a show with sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the Muslim Brotherhood's most prominent intellectual leaders, where he repeatedly called Egyptians to topple El Sisi government. In the view of the Egyptian government, Al Jazeera was not a news agency but a tool of Qatari interest, promoting subversive activities against the state. Access to the Qatari outlet was then completely blocked in Egypt later in 2017 for "spreading lies" and "supporting terrorism." This Egyptian-Qatari rivalry had serious consequences for journalists. Since 2013, several journalists of the Qatari-based news network have been arrested. One of the most paradigmatic cases was Mahmoud Hussein, who spent five years in jail, enduring conditions that amount to torture. Hussein was arrested for disseminating false news and receiving money from foreign authorities.

Egypt was not alone in its dispute against Qatar and Al Jazeera; Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states shared Egypt's stance on the emirate. These tensions culminated in a Saudi-led blockade of Qatar in 2017. After the crisis came to an end with a Kuwait-US-brokered deal, Egypt amended its ties with the emirate. This new start in Egyptian-Qatari relations translated

into a softening of Egypt's stance on the network. The most important gesture was agreeing to reopen Al Jazeera offices in Cairo, which had been closed since 2013.

In 2013, Mahmoud Hussein was released shortly after the restart of diplomatic relations between the two countries. But even with the normalisation of ties with Qatar, it is doubtful that Al Jazeera will enjoy a wide margin of freedom of expression. Despite Hussein's release, there are other Al Jazeera journalists still in prison, and shortly after the Egyptian-Qatari détente, an Al Jazeera presenter was convicted in absentia to 15 years in prison for spreading false news. The re-opening of Al Jazeera offices and the release of some journalists are gestures related to the improvement of ties with Qatar but can't be interpreted as a substantial change in the Egyptian government's attitudes towards freedom of expression. Al Jazeera wasn't the only foreign news channel that Egyptian authorities launched accusations against. Western media outlets were also targeted by the Egyptian government, although not with the same intensity as Al Jazeera. For example, in 2019 the BBC's website was blocked by Egyptian authorities, citing an "inaccurate" coverage of protests against the government. In 2020, the SMCR accused the BBC of bias against the government and basing its reports on rumours, not real evidence.

Conclusion

For the Egyptian government, the control of the media narrative is an element of the political control of the country. The press is subordinated to the government and is fundamental for restricting political opposition. The tendency during the El Sisi government has been the increase of government control over traditional media outlets and social media. It's doubtful that this trend will reverse, and it seems unlikely that there will be a significant change in the Egyptian state's treatment of media. Gestures like the re-opening of Al Jazeera offices, or the release of some journalists, don't signal a structural change in the Egyptian government media policy. In the future, the Egyptian government may continue releasing journalists, but this action will probably be a cosmetic gesture in reaction to international pressure.

Despite the government's plan to limit the new media's manoeuvring space, new media platforms are nevertheless able to provide a space for free content in domains that are not viewed as a challenge to the regime's legitimacy. However, although the regime's legitimacy was temporarily undermined by the new media during the early period of liberalisation, the regime recovered, eventually limiting the ability of the new media to threaten its authority.

Media in Iran: State Monopoly and the Voice of Dissents

Mariam Morsy

The relationship between Iranian authorities and media has had different themes throughout the years with different scales of control that intersects with the country's politics. However, complete control has been the dominating theme since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Out of 180 countries, Iran recently took the 173th place in the World Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders in 2020. All media outlets in Iran are in the hands of the regime, and journalists are constantly at risk of being jailed. This case study will focus on the development of media-state relations in Iran under Khomeini's rule, its manipulation strategy and its role during the recent Iranian uprisings that began after the death of Mahsa Amini.

Pre and Post-Islamic Revolution: A Continuation of Control

Media has always had a fundamental role in Iranian politics since the beginning of the twentieth century. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906 witnessed a free political debate through the press, when 90 newspapers were founded during that time for the secular, Marxist and Shiite clergy groups to form a block, aimed at limiting the Qajar dynasty's powers. Following the Qajars' ousting, the new Shah of Iran, Reza Khan, imposed a tight grip over the press, and made it the prime instrument to spread the state's ideology of modernisation and nationalism. Freedom of the press deteriorated, and publishers were strictly observed and censored if they criticised the state. The press started to flourish once again following WWII, where the number of newspapers reached 300 during the 50s under the democratic rule of Prime Minister Mohamed Mosaddegh. During this period, the press contained a wide range of political debates, from rightwing publications to the official newspapers of the Iranian Communist Party. After the crisis of the nationalisation of the oil industry, this short-lived openness ended with Mohammed Reza Shah's United States and Britain-backed coup d'état in 1953, which overthrew Mosaddegh's government and applied a strict security-minded media policy with a pro-western nationalist ideology. From 1953 to 1979, the press was highly regulated by the state, political discourse was restricted, and produced content was monitored, with the enforcement of the Iranian secret police (SAVAK).

Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty and led to the creation of the Islamic Republic ruled by Ayatollah Khomeini, media control was elevated to another level. The former Ministry of Information that had been the main body controlling media under the Shah was now renamed the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG, or the Ershad). The new ministry had the same responsibilities, but with a different approach. In legal terms, the Ministry is meant to uphold Article 24 of the

Constitution, which calls for the protection of the press, conditional on the principles of Islam and preservation of national independence. Thus, instead of imposing a pro-western secular nationalist ideology, it started enforcing an anti-western Islamist theocratic ideology. The media was thus subordinated to the revolutionary ideology through the MCIG and the IRIB (the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting); many dailies were expropriated by the revolutionary courts and turned into other state organs, satellites were jammed, and radio and television programmes became devoted to Islamising the Iranian society. Some newspapers were censored, including the country's second-oldest newspaper, Vaqaye'-e Ettefaqiyeh, and other important newspapers, such as Ettela'at and Kayhan, were also turned into tools for revolutionary government. While the theological government's values are based on the Qur'anic commandment of "allowing what is right and forbid what is wrong," the MCIG tends to produce what it calls "Islamic culture" through its industries. This revolves around shaping a religio-national culture based on the revolutionary ideals, which also includes political themes.

When it comes to the structure of the MCIG, it is considered to be very decentralised in the post-revolutionary period, this is due to the hierarchical arrangements of institutions that is based on the politics of Guardianship of the Jurist (Velayat-e Faqih). Each department within the MCIG is accountable to the Minister, who is in a hierarchical position with every MCIG branch around the country, and who is accountable directly to the Supreme Leader. This structure has led to competitive factional politics that resulted in conflicted policies and bureaucratic trajectories. Institutions often adopt different policies to serve different political agendas, which makes media policies highly dependent on the ruling administration. Bureaucratically, the MCIG's system of permits allow publishers, writers, and media outlets to publish their work to the public. However, the process of acquiring a permit is subjected to numerous bureau subdivisions that are responsible for determining what can be published and what has to be censored. Artists also lay under the MCIG's control, as it controls music, cinema, art, theatre and other cultural productions. The Department of Art Affairs adopts policies that aim to regulate and monitor every aspect of artistic expression, as well as to preserve the authentic Iranian culture. There is also the Department of Cinema and Audiovisual Affairs, which regulates film production with similar policies. Other non-analytical departments also exist, such as the Security Department, which is responsible for maintaining "moral" behaviour within the ministry's public spaces.

The Uncontrollable New Media

The lack of orderly censorship policy is widely manifested by the state's inability to entirely control the internet as a new social phenomena, especially during its early days in the 1990s. The government at first implemented various measures to control the internet, mostly

revolving around filtering and blocking of unwanted online contents. However, many of the regulatory implemented practices were based on existing mass media laws. Society's access to the internet led to new demands for freedoms and democracy, this synchronised the presidential elections that brought the reformist Muhammed Khatami to power in 1997. Demands for press liberalisation started to be met under Khatami's rule, and hundreds of reformist periodicals were launched. However, these papers witnessed clashes with the theocratic rulers and were often shut down, especially after the election of conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. Attempts by the state to strictly control the internet reappeared, with new application of censorship measures and calls by the judiciary to expand filtration over political content. By 2005, the filtering system's capacity increased considerably and more content was constantly blocked. The internet speed was also reduced to 128 kilobits per second, which affected social media activities and downloading abilities. Currently, internet publications (entesharat-e interneti) legally need permission to be published online just like newspapers.

The government's mechanisms to control the internet have become more and more advanced over the years. Following the Green Revolution of 2009, which witnessed a period of network shutdowns by the government across the country, the parliament passed a computer crimes law criminalising a number of online activities, including the criminalisation of encryption usage. The government then developed the network infrastructure to be completely centralised within the state. As a result, the Telecommunication Infrastructure Company of Iran became in control of all international gateways and is responsible for giving licences to internet service providers (ISPs) to maintain connections in Iran. In order to gain permissions, ISPs have to apply censorship technologies in their services that help the government monitor and control the users. During the 2019 protests, the government again enforced a period of total internet shutdown, with only national internet services available during that period. This, however, had a huge negative economic effect on the country, as the loss was estimated to be between $1 billion to $1.5 billion. This made the government rethink its strategy of internet control during uprisings. The government then implemented a new bill called "The User Protection Bill," which eliminates connections to any foreign platform that refuses to cooperate with the Iranian authority. Additionally, it also criminalises and disconnects Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), which is heavily used by Iranians in order to access blocked platforms of communication, and their stability has been affected since the implementation of this bill. During the latest mass uprising of Mahsa Amini, the government has applied numerous measures of internet control. When protests erupted, access to VPNs was shut down in order to isolate Iranians from the ongoing events – since protests were mostly covered by foreign media – without the need to shutdown the network completely. Eventually, with protests getting more intense, the government decided to shut down the internet, including Meta's Instagram and Whatsapp, which were the only unblocked foreign platforms until then. The government also used fake accounts and trolls to spread wrong hashtags and shift narratives about the uprising. Advanced technologies have also been used

to target, identify and locate protestors through their internet service providers, as well as accessing their messages, which resulted in a huge number of arrests through tracking.

Despite the state's press monopoly and attempts to draw "red lines," political debates and criticism of the government on the internet are very common. Banned foreign-based TV stations are also followed by millions of Iranians using illegal satellite dishes. Around 70% of Iranians are online, and are allowed to access blocked social media websites, such as twitter, Facebook and Youtube, through anti-filter systems. Social media is used by activists, dissents as well as state officials. Likewise, a number of Persian-language stations that are based in the USA, Dubai and Europe target Iranian audiences and are followed within Iran despite multiple interference from the government. These lively open platforms allowed today's democratic opposition movement to flourish, and new generations of Iranian journalists are producing newspapers that challenge and criticise the authority, and are brought into the public sphere.

State Victimisation Strategy

In addition to the state's control mechanisms, it also has disinformation campaigns that aim to shift narratives during protests. The Revolutionary government has been portraying itself as a main target of western political conspiracy and foreign disinformation propagandas. This victimising strategy is manifested through various mechanisms. For example, dissent journalists are being accused of being sponsored by the CIA to "intensify external pressures." Iran has hundreds of jailed journalists that criticised the regime, and their accusations differ from disrupting national security to joining anti-state organisations. This mechanism is aimed to portray anti-regime writers as anti-Iran, thus delegitimising them in the eyes of society.

The state has also been using minorities as a false-threat. During recent protests, the state media outlets have been presenting protests as occurring only in peripheral regions such as Khuzestan, Kurdistan and Balochistan. This facilitated portraying demonstrators as "separatists" and "anti-Iran" in order to discredit the whole uprising and justify the use of violence. This mechanism of using hate speech against minorities is frequently used by the state. For example, four suspected members of a leftist Kurdish political party (Komala) were recently accused by the media of being affiliated with Israel. This disinformation strategy that uses minorities is not only limited to Kurds, it also targets Azeris, Baluchis, Arabs, Baha'i and Turkmens. The strategy has institutionalised public racism towards non-Persian, non-Shia groups and increased aversion towards their democratic demands.

Online misinformation strategy was also used during the recent protests to provoke it into an armed conflict. State-run fake accounts started spreading news and videos of Kurdish armed groups among protestors. While others showed Iranian security forces dressed like Kurdish

forces and harassing the public. This aimed to give the impression that protests have turned violent to justify state forces' brutal responses.

Conclusion

The regime in Iran tends to have more control over what is being brought to the public sphere in Iran in order to avoid the spread of criticism and dissent. Since the emergence of the internet, the government has been systematically developing new legislations in order to tighten the grip over online content. With the existence of new technologies, such as anti-filter systems and VPNs, it is nearly impossible to control internet usage across the country. This can be manifested by Iran's frequent uprisings of this century, and the society's consciousness of its rights. However, the Iranian state has not indicated any intention to loosen its grip of control. Monopoly mechanisms might become stricter following recent protests, as seen after previous uprisings. Thus, unless the state decides to adopt a reformist trajectory, the state of media in Iran shall remain controlled by the regime, and dissents' voices shall remain hidden and intolerated.

Media in Saudi Arabia: National Unity Building in the Face of Contentious Modernisation

Abid Zaidi

The media has enjoyed a tenuous relationship with the state in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia over the past few decades. From the development of Saudi Basic Law concerning the functions of the media, the introduction of recent censorship charters, the recent rise of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, and the 2018 assassination of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the balance between preserving national unity whilst asserting the press' fundamental right to freedom of expression has been incredibly tumultuous. This report covers a brief modern history of the development of the media industry in the Kingdom, the laws that underpin this balance, and recent developments under the "modernising programmes" of the Crown Prince.

A Brief History – State Regulation and Established Media Presences (c. 1950s - 2010)

The relationship between the state and the media is largely defined by several decades of regulatory revision, and the development of avowed institutions that enforce this legislation. Developed under King Faisal bin Abdulaziz al-Saud (1964 - 1975), Article 39 of the Kingdom's Basic Law constitution-like charter states: "Information, publication, and all other media shall employ courteous language and the state's regulations, and they shall contribute to the education of the nation and the bolstering of its unity – [the media] is prohibited from committing acts leading to disorder and division, affecting the security of the state and its public relations, or undermining human dignity". Before Faisal's rule, Saudi Arabia had no magazines, no official state broadcaster (either audio or visual) and only had three newspapers, for a combined distribution of 25,000 copies amongst its 4 million citizens. Under Faisal's plans to update the Saudi state in line with the 20th century, a growingly quiescent press (in the face of state repression) was called upon to write and publish in support of the "common goal" to develop the country. Contemporaneous to this was the development of the Ministry of Information in 1962 and the state-run Saudi News Agency in 1971.

This nation building imperative, alongside moments that threatened this unity (namely the siege of the Grand Mosque in Makkah in 1979, an attack in part motivated by the assailants' disagreements with the Kingdom's adoption of television which was seen as a deviation from pure/Salafi Islam), prompted the state to develop and consolidate its hold over the media

industry. Censorship was prevalent from this period – news of the siege was not announced until the day after on state broadcasters, and international broadcasters had their signals jammed until state television had broken the news, in which a heavily curated story of the siegers being expertly dispatched by military officials was reported.

Under King Fahd bin Abdulaziz al-Saud (1982 - 2005), public discontent with the regime's repression began to bubble over. The development of the Islamic Awakening (*al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya*) movement, which aimed to push the Kingdom towards a constitutional monarchy, played a significant role in influencing the state's subsequent revisions of its media law. A 1992 media policy statement outlined both the religious and political dimensions of the responsibilities journalists faced in the Kingdom – whilst acquiescing to the Islamic Awakening's desires for an independent mass media, the statement also delineated the development of a state-run Saudi Broadcasting Authority, which currently oversees almost all domestic broadcasting outlets. This body, chaired by the Minister of Culture and Information (drawn from a pool of lower level Saudi princes) oversees all audio-visual broadcasts in the region. Complementarily to this was Fahd's Law of Printing and Publication issued in 2003, which stipulates any sort of physical publication or broadcast should not conflict with the basic tenets of Sharia Law, nor will it threaten public security and "stir up discord", with punishments ranging from fines, imprisonments, and the death sentence, which has been exercised multiple times in the regime's recent history, to be outlined below.

These regulations have significantly impacted the contingent paths that key sectors within the media industry have developed under the contemporary Saudi state, none more so than visual broadcasting, that has occupied a premier position within Saudi media developments. Saudi authorities first instituted a national television broadcasting service in 1965 – before then, existing channels were not Saudi; AJL-TV had been instituted by the US Air Force as a complement to their presence within the east of the Kingdom alongside Saudi ARAMCO. Al-Saudiyya, however, was distinctly Saudi Arabian, launched as a flagship Arabic language channel, to be complemented by the Kingdom's international broadcasting arm, the MBC in 1991, which, whilst founded in London and housed in the UAE, was launched to counteract the growing influence of propaganda from other neighbouring Arab countries, particularly those emerging from Ba'athist Iraq and the Egypt Satellite Channel. Whilst fundamentally the Saudi state does not subscribe to the same proviso as other GCC countries in that its constitution does not formally protect the freedom of expression (a law that allowed contemporaneous media presences in other Arab countries, like al-Jazeera in Qatar, to flourish), the balance between censorship and freedom of expression has varied in the state's history, more extremely to the former as opposed to the latter.

The prevailing moods of ruling elites and the religious establishment has also heavily determined the paths taken by the media, in particular its approach to censorship. Whilst the state has, on rare occasion, allowed certain journalists at certain publications and channels to compose critical pieces on the state, the content of these articles, as well as who is allowed to write these, are pre-determined and vetted by the state, a process that is vested in the Prince

that takes charge of the Ministry of Information and the Saudi Broadcasting Agency. The case of Wajeha al-Huwaider exemplifies this – a prominent women's rights activist writing for the state's most popular publications, al-Watan and Arab News, al-Huwaider was one of a few journalists that occupied a rare position in being allowed to present (albeit minimal) criticism on the state in terms of its women's rights. However, her licence for publication within the Kingdom was revoked in 2003 on account of her "liberal attitude" to women's issues that "threatened the sanctity of the religion", coincidentally occurring after a scathing article composed on the head of the Ministry of Information.

The MBS Era & Saudi Vision 2030

After the death of the previous monarch, King Abdullah (2005 - 2015), King Salman ascended to power, who, on account of his faltering health, vested significant political and economic power in the hands of his son and current Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS). Under MBS, the Kingdom has been pushing towards a new vision for the future in the form of **Saudi Vision 2030**, wherein the state wishes to reduce its dependence on oil, diversify its economy, and open up several industries for foreign investment. In so doing, MBS has undertaken a string of modernisation programmes in an attempt to make the state appear internationally competitive and secularly compatible.

The media has played a significant role in this programme, both as a tool to justify the trajectories of the state and as an object of modernist reform. Spurred by this programme, Saudi Arabia launched a new channel, SBC (a channel in the broader Saudi Broadcasting Agency/Corporation conglomerate) which was "designed to lure young viewers and project a modern image beyond the kingdom's borders". The idea of the channel was to fulfil a complementary function to the active infrastructure projects of Vision 2030, reflecting the changes seen in the kingdom in the artistic, cultural, and entertainment spheres, as well as providing a lens through which such progress could be observed by the citizens of the Kingdom.

Such programmes of media modernisation have often been carried out through vessels of rights repression. In November 2017, three months before the announcement of Saudi Vision 2030, Kingdom authorities arrested dozens of the state's political, media, and business elite for varying charges of corruption. Amongst those arrested were media moguls Prince al-Waleed bin Talal (head of Rotana), Walid al-Ibrahim (head of MBC) and Saleh Kamel (head of ART), three heavyweights who defined the Saudi satellite boom of the late 80s. Such a move was considered a means by which MBS, wishing to exert influence through the SBC, could establish himself within the industry as well as possess a unified position through which his Vision 2030 campaign could be articulated within the media.

Jamal Khashoggi

It remains clear that whilst Vision 2030 made use of the media as a tool for economic growth and social pacification, a platform for freedom of expression was still not provided. After many years serving as a foreign correspondent for several Saudi and pan-Arab newspapers, Jamal Khashoggi made a reputation as deputy editor-in-chief of Arab News from 1999 to 2003. Moving to the al-Watan daily, a publication known for its (albeit timid) criticism of the Kingdom, he published articles on far more sensitive issues, including the nature of arms deals between the U.S. and the Kingdom, as well as on the 2003 Riyadh Compound Bombings by extremists dissatisfied with the state's growing platform of modernisation, directly calling out members of the Wahhabi clerical establishment. After being dismissed from the paper on account of his critical views of the state and the ideology of Salafi-Wahhabism as a whole, Khashoggi fled to the U.S. where he began writing for the Washington Post in 2017.

His assassination within the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul brought intense international scrutiny on MBS, who, after weeks of providing contradictory claims, took "full responsibility" for the killing as it happened on his watch, though denied ordering the killing himself. The affair also brought into sharp focus the use of spyware by the regime in targeting dissident journalists. Amnesty International claimed the state used NSO Group's Pegasus software to target activists and journalists, including Khashoggi, using the software to track down dissidents both domestically and internationally. Omar Abdulaziz, a Saudi activist residing in Canada, also claims to be a victim of this spyware, targeted for access to the sensitive conversations he had with Khashoggi before his death. This was further capitulated by the fact NSO's operations are headquartered in Israel, which further sank MBS' reputation amongst Arab reporters and elites alike.

Despite acceptance of culpability, MBS's rejection of freedom of expression has also extended to criticism of his handling of the affair. In 2019, under pressure from the state, Netflix removed an episode of the comedy stand-up show "Patriot Act: with Hasan Minhaj" that was particularly critical of MBS, for viewers within the Saudi state, under the explanation that Minhaj and Netflix were violating Saudi Arabian anti-cybercrime law. Saudi Vision 2030 has thus subsequently seen significant hesitancy from international investors, as they struggle to contend with the programme's modernist rhetoric in the face of existent, albeit less publicised, state repression.

Social Media

In tandem with Saudi Vision 2030, the Kingdom's attitude to the growth of social media has had to walk a similar balance between preservation of national unity, whilst presenting an image of liberal modernity.

According to a recent report by Arab News, around 82% of the population actively utilise social media (defined as at least one interaction with a major social media platform every day), with a majority of the population active on several content-producing platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and Facebook. Active implementation of Article 39 has been difficult, but appears as though it is **implemented retroactively**; that is, punishing transgressors rather than active content moderation before-the-fact.

For international content, the Saudi state directs all international internet traffic through a proxy farm, where several content filters are instituted. These largely pertain to the censorship of dissident (affiliated with opposition movements, or Shia affiliated content) and immoral (pornographic, apostatic, or otherwise) content online. For the most part, the recent uptake of HTTPS encrypted connections on the modern internet make censorship for these pages incredibly difficult, however reports of individual Wikipedia pages and certain Google services being blocked have been reported in recent years, particularly in relation to certain spikes in internet traffic. For instance, blocking Wikipedia and international news outlets (such as from Fox News, the Los Angeles Times, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) in the immediate aftermath of Khashoggi's murder.

For domestic content, recent developments are reflective of the Kingdom's desire to maintain a basic adherence to the "preservation of national unity" goals of decades prior. The General Authority for Audiovisual Media, a recently formed watchdog, issued a public declaration in 2014 to regulate the work of domestic YouTube channels, planning to censor content that is "terrorist" in nature. As part of MBS' modernising Vision, the stage has been set for a new generation of content creators actively promoting the Saudi state's fledgling non-religious tourism industry on such platforms. The programme, known as Mawthooq (Arabic for "verified"), will allow individuals to post advertisements and promotional content on social media, for a licence fee of ~$4,000. These licences are being touted as legal protections for influencers, who are able to standardise and solidify a stream of income from advertisers, whilst also standardising rates and contractual obligations across the Kingdom in the eyes of the state.

Dissidence and Social Media in the Kingdom

Social media also plays a key role in focusing opposition to the regime. Whilst largely insulated from the sweeping regime-changing pressures that engulfed the majority of the Middle East region, one main case exemplifies the relative power of social media in the Saudi case to achieve nation-specific goals; that of social media's use in the case for allowing women the right to drive. Indeed, social media occupied a significant transnational role in focusing regional energies for the achievement of Saudi-specific goals. Israa Ghrayeb, a 21 year-old Palestinian woman murdered in an "honour killing" by her family spawned the hashtags "Israa Ghrayeb", "We are all Israa Ghrayeb", and "No honour in honour crimes" in Saudi Arabia. Saudi women were pivotal in the spreading of this news across social media

platforms, making sure it remained at the forefront of trending lists. Most importantly was the utilisation of this movement's momentum to grow the subsequent #Talat movement, which was a precursor for the Kingdom and MBS to concede the legal right of women to drive, though this could be contextualised amidst MBS's wider reforms as a tactic of informal cooptation, ceding a small social loss for a wider win for Vision 2030.

However, the excesses of such a movement in potentially infringing on Article 39 have led to the rise of "digital vigilantism". The Kingdom released the *Kollona Amn* (Arabic for "we are all security") App in 2019, in an attempt to speed up "rescue missions" from road accidents or suspicious behaviour in an attempt to better community welfare. However, the app has since been used by state-supporting hardliners to report individuals that contribute to behaviour they view as in conflict with the state, altering either the police or relevant authorities, though this remit is highly "broad and vague – anything could be a crime". Salma al-Shebab, a PhD student at Leeds University, was handed a 35 year sentence for tweets critical of the Kingdom that were likely referred to the authorities through anonymous tips within the app.

Blogging has also occupied a significant position within focusing opposition to the regime, though due to blogs being natively hosted within the Kingdom, crackdowns are extremely common. The most high profile case of dissident blogging came in the form of Raif Badawi, founder of the website *Free Saudi Liberals*, who was sentenced to 10 years and 1,000 lashes on "counts of apostasy" and "threatening the stability of the state". For Badawi, a combination of the state's actively monitoring of liberal content producers, and his content production without a licence, contributed to his arrest and subsequent imprisonment.

More broadly, freedom of expression on social media within the Kingdom has been supported by several underground movements. The Bees Army (or *Jeesh al-Nahl*) operates as an opposition movement to growing Saudi propaganda online, and organises several "social media storms", flooding the accounts of state-affiliated journalists and ruling elites. Such movements have entrenched links to established state media presences, with Abdulaziz and Khashoggi pledging significant financial support to the Bees, in assisting their purchase of foreign SIM cards and devices so as to engage in their activities without fear of being exposed and punished.

Future Prospects

Broadly, the state of media within Saudi Arabia can be considered not free. Despite a tenuous balance between extremely limited freedom of expression and harsh censorship, the state has increasingly been trending towards the latter, even in spite of the Kingdom pursuing an aggressively modernising campaign. In the face of the assassination of Khashoggi, Saudi Vision 2030 has placed an awkward halt on the Crown Prince's ability to curry investment and tacit support for the modernising programme, and MBS' attitudes towards social media

and a crackdown on dissident social media users is reflective of a broader trend reinforcing the state's decades-old practises of repression and censorship.

Despite these censors, the Saudi state is still making an avowed attempt at modernising, not least reflected in its ever-increasing array of entertainment options on the state's visual broadcasting and streaming mediums, both internationally and domestically sourced. Therefore, whilst international media conglomerates may find greater opportunities to criticise MBS' crackdown on freedom of expression, they too may be concerned with potentially losing out on a fruitful new market for content of nearly 35 million people.

Media in Syria: Chaos and Control

Justin Sin

The Syrian Arab Republic has been in an ongoing civil war since March 2011. As of 2021, President Bashar al-Assad's forces still controlled approximately two-thirds of the country's territory. This includes all six of the country's main cities – Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Latakia, Tartus, Deraa, and Deir al-Zour. Approximately 12 million of the estimated population of 17 million falls under this dominion. An additional population of an estimated seven million are abroad as refugees. These refugees rely on smartphones and the media to traverse risks in unknown environments, find information and communicate with friends, family and other allies. As a result, smartphones are a lifeline on par in importance with water and food. All Syrians are vulnerable to information instability and heightened exposure to violence from the state. The remaining third of Syrian territory is primarily controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces – a principally Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian group opposed to the government– and other opposition groups like Tahrir al-Sham and ISIS. Although opposition against the Assad regime is now mostly confined to limited territory in the country's north, the continued splintering and lack of unification mean that our considerations of media control are somewhat varied based on the group which owns the territory. As such, this section takes a multifaceted approach. While the report focuses primarily on the restrictions, coercion and control methods used by the Assad regime, the media use by other parties operating within the conflict must also be considered.

Media Surveillance, Control, and Coercion

The Syrian telecommunications market is one of the most restricted and regulated among Middle Eastern countries. The Syrian government has created an infrastructure of surveillance built around the control of internet service providers (ISPs), mobile providers, and aggressive hacking and tracking operations, which lead to the detention and persecution of critics, journalists and other activists. The regime-controlled and regulated telecommunications infrastructure, the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE), operates both as an ISP and official telecommunications regulator. In 2007, STE acquired the Central Monitoring System, which monitors all data communications within Syrian territory. This allowed the STE to effectively suppress dissent, freeze internet access during uprisings, block all kinds of media criticism of the government and restrict other popular online services. In 2008, the government solicited more bids to construct a surveillance system which filtered content and combated political challenges through the analysis of keywords in data packets which allowed these data packets to pass through without being stored. The new system was centralised, able to monitor all telecommunications within Syria while having

real-time location tracking ability of up to 50 targets while simultaneously being completely undetectable. The STE claimed this was necessary to ensure security against foreign or domestic infiltration; however, the tool was used chiefly to torture and kill dissenters even before the start of the civil war. Frederic Jacobs, a researcher, based in Syria, stated that all traffic was documented on hard drive disks controlled and stockpiled by Assad's regime. Additionally, approximately 55% of the country's cellular market is owned by Syriatel – a regime-affiliated provider. MTN Syria, a subsidiary of the South African MTN, has been subject to government regulation and forced by the government to comply with the filtering and blocking users' telecommunications. The Assad regime's access to and surveillance of mobile phones are very consequential as phones have a pivotal role in revolutions, and the suppression of citizen journalists reduces opportunities for change in the Syrian people's suffering under systematic government repression.

The Syrian Government has four intelligence agencies. The Department of Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence Directorates are tied to the Ministry of Defence. The General Intelligence and Political Intelligence Directorate are connected to the Ministry of Interior. Of these four agencies, the Department of Military Intelligence plays the most crucial role in media surveillance, control and coercion. This department has more than 20 different branches, which control a range of responsibilities from surveying officers of the armed forces to monitoring and targeting civil rights activists. Within these department branches, 211 and 225 have been considered valuable tools for the government in monitoring and eliminating enemies of the state. Branch 211 is the Computer Branch, responsible for blocking and unblocking websites while simultaneously providing support to other surveillance branches. Meanwhile, Branch 225 focuses on phone communications which block and disable Short Message Services (SMS). The powers of Branch 225 are far-reaching as they can tap phones and stop text messages from sending before it arrives at a given recipient. Branch 225 also draws manpower from all four intelligence agencies but is ultimately a part of the Department of Military Intelligence.

In addition to state-owned centralised telecommunications providers and widespread, systematic monitoring by the country's intelligence agencies, the Assad regime has also used proxy "state-sanctioned hackers" to surveil, control and coerce. The Syrian Malware Team (SMT) and the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA) have been prominent third-party actors operating in the Assad regime's interests to undermine any resistance to the government. In 2011, Assad confirmed the existence of the Syrian Electronic Army and thanked them for supporting the Syrian Army. The SEA has launched various attacks and vandalised renowned international media sites. For example, they replaced the Harvard University website homepage image with a picture of Bashar al-Assad. They committed similar vandalism to Forbes, CNBC, The Telegraph, Chicago Tribune, Human Rights Watch, Dell, Microsoft, Ferrari and UNICEF. The SEA also uses phishing, which targets and steals information from many individuals. Hackers sent emails to news outlets with malware-infested links, which

transmitted locations, intercepted communications and posted fake news stories on Twitter accounts. In one case, a fake tweet was published from the Associated Press' official Twitter account, which stated that the White House had been attacked and Obama was injured. Although it was determined that this Tweet was baseless, the damage had already been done and resulted in the Associated Press losing $136 billion in equity market value. In 2012, Syrian opposition activists were targeted by several trojans who installed spyware into their computers, and these phishing attacks stole Youtube and Facebook credentials. In 2013, SEA also hacked into the messaging app Tango and stole millions of personal phone numbers, emails and contacts, which it handed over to the government. The purpose here is to gather information about opposition to the Syrian government whether it be foreign or domestic. The mass surveillance serves as a measure of invoking fear into citizens who contemplate dissent while simultaneously serving as a route to identify and punish legitimate dissenters by storing vast amounts of data on them.

Media Legislation

The Baathist government, Assad's government, shut down all independent newspapers in 1963. Al Baath is the only significant remaining Syrian newspaper, which acts as an outlet for the ruling party. The situation surrounding media legislation in Syria can be summarised as self-censorship created by a fear of punishment due to the intentional ambiguity of many legal clauses. Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father and the previous president ruling from 1971 until 2000, approved the first press law in 1974. This established the media in Syria as an accessory to propagate the ruling party's agenda. The public was made to understand that religious, ethnic and sexual references were strictly taboo. Moreover, any criticism against the government was also heavily suppressed. The 1985 Law on Associations and Private Societies, Law No.9328, restricts the establishment of media organisations and regulates the establishment of any associations with the Syrian Arab Republic by strictly controlling all meetings.

Bashar al-Assad introduced Decree No. 50, better known as the Publications Law, which passed in September 2001. While the Publications Law claims that private press is unrestricted in their operations, all media companies must obtain licences to publish from the Prime Minister – who may reject an application at any time on the grounds of public interest. In cases where this is violated, periodicals risk losing their licence and steep fines between 500,000 to 1 million Syrian pounds. This is coupled with up to three years imprisonment for publishing fake news which is categorised as undesirable reports on military affairs, accepting foreign funds, inciting public unrest or threatening the nation's interests. Nevertheless, while the SEA has been an avid supporter of the Assad regime, they still posted real military reports and sometimes criticised the hypocrisy of the regime. For example, using

Facebook because there was no need for a media licence, the SEA published information that refuted state media reports on military activity which denied opposition gains in territory.

Over the last two decades, the Syrian government has continuously introduced laws which supposedly allowed freedom of expression and communication yet repeatedly undermined such clauses by stating that any of these freedoms could be curbed under the guise of “national security”. Assad’s introduction of Decree No. 108 in 2011 called for a stop to media monopolies, banned journalists' arrest, questioning or searching, and guaranteed the right to access information about public affairs. In practice, these protections were non-existent in government-held areas. In the same year, the Emergency Law was revoked as a concession to the Arab Spring protests. This law had been in effect for 48 years and supported the government’s tight media control on the premise that the country was in a state of emergency. However, the government subsequently passed Counter Terrorism Law No.19 in 2012, reinstating the same powers as the Emergency Law under a different name. Article 8 of this new law targeted many civilians and accused them of publicising or promoting terrorist activities. The same law describes a terrorist act as “creating a state of panic among the people and destabilising public security.” Articles 42 and 43 guarantees the rights to freedom of expression and the press. The new constitution has several anti-press clauses which barred media from publishing media which affected national unity and security or incited religious conflict. Article 26 states that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour possesses the power to nominate board members of any association at any point and disband any association it deems a threat. According to the Penal Code, defamation is a crime, and punishments vary between fines to imprisonment. State-employed editorial staff are required by law to go through state certifications to become registered.

Looking Ahead: Future of Media in Syria

Syria's current state of affairs represents a widespread and unrestrained abuse of surveillance powers exercised by the government and its proxy groups. Through a combination of its control of the network, government agencies, state-sanctioned hackers, and intentionally open-ended media legislation, the Syrian regime has created a method for the systematic abuse of its citizens’ privacy rights without being held accountable. The ability of the Syrian people to organise and participate in political life, share information and ideas and generally express themselves without fear of immediate reprisal has been severely suppressed. These acts of control are facilitated by tools and technology supplied by multinational and foreign corporate entities such as the South African Mobile Telephone Network (MTN), the Italian Area SpA, the American Blue Coat cybersecurity company and even Facebook. The lack of corporate accountability undermines any efforts to resist the Assad regime. As such, the South African, Italian and American governments which claim to be allies which claim to be

allies to Syrian citizens should encourage these corporations to take more active measures to reduce the distribution of these technologies to dangerous groups like the Syrian regime.

Looking ahead, it is difficult to see any routes for Syrian citizens to take to improve their situations. Every time a particularly controversial law is released and rescinded – as was the case with the Emergency Law – a law with similar powers is introduced to maintain the government's imposition of control over the media and the people. No privacy laws exist to guard people's rights against illicit and drastic government surveillance, and penal and cyber laws which preach imprecise standards possess broad discretion and authority. Moreover, the lack of judicial independence and institutional infrastructures means there are no solutions for those that are subject to punishment by the regime. As the conflict in Syria has reached a standstill, the government might return its focus to the coercion and control of its population, including the seven million currently abroad as refugees. Many of these Syrians initially operated with a shallow level of digital literacy. Their ability to use cell phones is limited due to a lack of reliable phone networks. However, as refugee networks continue to expand, digital literacy among refugees has also increased significantly. Smartphones are now becoming crucial to refugee organisation and movement while also becoming a crucial part of providing a platform for foreign criticism of Assad.

As this report has mentioned, the Syrian government views phones as tools helping to challenge and overthrow the government. As such, it is in the regime's interests to keep digital literacy low. However, as more Syrian refugees are exposed to foreign influences and livelihoods where phones are essential, we may see digital literacy in Syria increase as returning Syrian refugees bring back more technology. We can predict more government crackdowns. The government currently confiscates mobile phones at checkpoints and detains those who receive foreign calls. The regime also tracks international calls to identify those opposing the government using the methods discussed in this report. Refugees have developed their phone-use practices to protect themselves. In camps around Syria and even in Western countries like France, refugees have used Jordanian cards to call family back home, believing the regime cannot monitor calls on Jordanian devices. They also began using codes to engage in "secure" discussions.

Overall, this report summarises the combined use of media surveillance, control, coercion and legislation by the Syrian government in order to dominate all forms of opposition both foreign and domestic. If the situation should change, refugees must continue to find innovative ways to avoid these media control measures. Additionally, technology corporations which inadvertently allow the continuation of the Assad regime's media dominance should take a more active stand against this prevailing issue.

Media in Türkiye: A Decade of Restrictions

The role of the media, whether it be popular, state-run, opposition, or social media, has had a contentious past few years in the Republic of Türkiye. From legislative changes to jailed journalists, social media networking to state-run channels, the media nexus continually intersects with Turkish politics at all levels. Though deeply complicated with generations of political history, this brief case will highlight two salient phenomena related to the media – jailing of journalists and the banning, or threatening to ban, of social and opposition media channels. Contextualising these two sections will be a discussion of media-related legislation in Türkiye over the past few years, ending with an in-depth analysis of Türkiye's approach to media in the immediate future and its impact on stakeholders globally. With the 2023 presidential elections looming and domestic economic realities facing a continued decline, the media will play an integral role in voicing support for, and dissent of, Türkiye's leading Justice and Development Party (AKP) and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the coming months.

The Power to Silence: Jailed Journalists & Banned Media

Türkiye's largest issues surrounding the media fall under a large umbrella of utilising political power to restrict speech from multiple scales: individual journalists, local media, and international media and social media platforms.

Türkiye has been one of the highest jailers of journalists in the past few years, ranked 2nd after China in a 2020 report by the Committee to Protect Journalists. The same report identifies 37 journalists jailed in Türkiye in 2020 alone, while Reporters Without Borders estimates that around 200 journalists have been jailed in some capacity in the 5-year period since the 15 July 2016 coup attempt. In related statistics from Reporters Without Borders, 3,436 journalists have been fired, 160 media outlets forced to close, and 63 journalists have been convicted of insulting the President since the coup attempt. At time of writing, there are 45 jailed journalists, as documented by the group Free Turkey Journalists. In response to an inquiry about the current number of jailed journalists, Türkiye's Ministry of Justice released a statement saying that the figure "does not concern the public".

2022 has seen a number of high-profile cases involving journalists facing jail time. In January, prominent journalist Sedef Kabas was ordered jailed while awaiting trial over a tweet and statement she made on an opposition television channel. The tweet was "when the ox climbs to the palace, he does not become a king, but the palace becomes a barn," in reference to President Erdogan. While supporters of Erdogan and close allies within his

Justice and Development Party (AKP) immediately lambasted Kabas and called for her imprisonment, the opposition channel she frequented called her arrest an attempt to intimidate journalists and the media. In June, 19 journalists and 2 media workers were arrested in the southeastern city of Diyarbakir, with 16 being held in jail under pre-trial arrest, while the remaining were released after 8 days in detention with travel restrictions. In October, 11 Kurdish journalists were detained in simultaneous house raids across 7 cities as part of an anti-terror operation led by the Ankara Chief Public Prosecutor's Office.

The targeting of journalists is often not an individual occurrence – the raids conducted in 2022 form a larger chronology of targeting media sources and publishing outlets. In addition to the 160 media outlets forced to shut since the coup, 1,358 articles or links to articles were deleted by court orders and 90% of media outlets have become owned by pro-government Turkish business executives, according to Reporters Without Borders.

The largest shuttering of media outlets came immediately after the 2016 coup attempt. In the two years following 15 July, Erdogan declared a state of emergency throughout Türkiye. This state of emergency status allowed judicial decrees to shut down 45 newspapers, 15 magazines, 16 television channels, 23 radio stations, 3 news agencies, and 29 publishers and distributors under a variety of anti-terror and national security-protecting clauses and cases. Most of the 131 shut media outlets were accused of supporting the exiled cleric Fetullah Gulen and the coup attempt. Included during this wave of shutdowns was Zaman, once one of Türkiye's most popular media outlets and believed to be very close to Gulen. In March 2016, before the coup attempt, Zaman's board was taken over by government-appointed trustees, a move that some see as a precursory step before its shutdown soon after 15 July. The targeting of local media continued past 2016. Antalya police raided the homes of YouTube journalists in 2021; TELE1 channel, the outlet that Sedef Kabas frequented, has been faced with numerous fines and periods of broadcasting outages this year by Türkiye's Radio and Television Supreme Council; and Olay TV, created in November 2020 and open for only 26 days, was shut by what many call government dissatisfaction with allegedly favourable coverage of the HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party).

In this reactionary climate to local media, social media has faced similar, if not harsher, attention. Last month's Istiklal bombing that killed 6 saw the Radio and Television Supreme Council implement a media ban on the topic of the explosion, in addition to the Information and Communications Technologies Authority limiting the bandwidth of social media platforms Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram. In December 2016, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp were temporarily unavailable after the assassination of the Russian Ambassador to Türkiye, Andrei Karlov, in Ankara. After an airstrike in Syria in 2020, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram became inaccessible to a majority of Türkiye for 16 hours. Social media was additionally hard to access in the hours after the 2016 coup attempt. Twitter was banned for 2 weeks in 2014 – a year after the

explosive Gezi Park protests – and then-Prime Minister Erdogan said the ban would allow the international community to "witness the power of the Turkish Republic". President Erdogan blocked access to Wikipedia in 2017 and it was lifted in January 2020 after a court ruling.

This trajectory of silencing, banning, and blocking media at all levels – from journalists to local media to international outlets – remains concerning. The rapid ability of Erdogan's government to institute even temporary media blockages creates a series of challenges for circulation of opposition materials.

Media Legislation

Apart from the state of emergency that allowed the issuance of emergency decrees to shut down media outlets, numerous highly controversial pieces of media legislation have arisen that continue to hamper speech and debate.

On 31 July 2020, Türkiye's parliament passed an amendment to Law No. 5651, called Law on the Regulation of Publications Made on the Internet and Fight Against Crimes Committed Through These Publications. The amendment requires social media companies with over 1 million daily site visits to hold an office or legal representative in Türkiye, representatives which will be held accountable to Turkish legal affairs. The amendment also gives Türkiye the power to cut broadcasting by up to 90% for platforms who refuse to open a local office, in addition to obliging social media companies to store users' data in Türkiye and release a report every 6 months regarding compliance with blocking and removal orders from both government and individual actors. The amendment also allows court orders to require removing content from a site, which were previously only allowed to block access to websites. Opposition to this bill, which fell mostly along partisan lines – with the Republican People's Party (CHP) condemning the AKP and Nationalist Movement Party's (MHP) – claimed that President Erdogan and his supporters are not only trying to censor access to media, but also impose fines on international media companies for not adhering to increasingly strict government requirements. Rather than see this social media law as a strengthening of Erdogan's political reach over information dissemination, critics see it as a desperate move to try and control a Turkish population increasingly relying on international and independent media for reliable information.

The largest recent bill concerning the media was passed by parliament in October 2022. Known unofficially as the 'disinformation law' and formally as the "Law on Amending the Press Law", the legislation gives the Turkish government power to jail journalists or social media users for up to three years for spreading disinformation. Article 29 is one of the most concerning for advocates of free speech, which allows jail time for those "who publicly disseminates false information about the country's domestic and foreign security, public order

and general health, with the sole aim of creating anxiety, fear or panic among the public". Jail sentences of up to three years could be increased by half if perpetrators are found to be concealing their identity online. In addition, social media companies are now required to have their local representatives – established in the 2020 amendment – hand over the personal details of users suspected of spreading disinformation. Similar to the punishments outlined in 2020, social media platforms will face steep fines, curbing of bandwidth, and a 6-month ban on ad revenue if they do not comply with the new law.

Analysts remain concerned for the implementation timeline of the new law. Media companies are required to comply with the regulations by April 2023, and many are dubious about actual compliance as global data regulations and privacy statements are likely to take precedence over country-level restrictions. Given the deadline for compliance in April, however, there is rising concern that President Erdogan will use this bill to restrict, and possibly ban, international media platforms in the lead up to the June 2023 presidential elections.

Looking Ahead: Media Futures

The immediate future for media distribution and freedom of speech in Türkiye remains grim.

The past few years have seen President Erdogan continue to take control and throttle up the restrictions and regulations faced by all actors in the Turkish media industry. From house raids of journalists to the shutting down of local media to increasingly demanding requirements for international platforms, the outlook for Erdogan's media policy is not conducive to promoting free speech, opposition, or dissent of any kind.

The 'disinformation' law remains one of the most concerning pieces of legislation in Erodgan and the AKP's genealogy of censorship. With the sweeping ability to jail anyone for a social media post or story deemed to be spreading disinformation, the law risks tilting Türkiye into a state-run media monolith. Popular debates today, such as distrust over the government's published inflation rates or the number of COVID-19 deaths, will become criminalised and punishable by jail time. However, the move is not surprising: targeting of media platforms as early as the 2013 Gezi Park protests shows that media control has been on Erodgan's mind for nearly a decade. The 2016 coup attempt and the subsequent state of emergency granted Erdogan the judicial power to knock down local media and brick-and-mortar publications in the name of national security. Using that same framework, Erdogan has now expanded this method of suppression into the digital and international realm.

One of the most troublesome ramifications for an increasingly restricted media is the June 2023 presidential election. With the timeline given for international media platforms to comply with the October 2022 law, it would not be unreasonable to expect Erodgan to have

the juridical justification to restrict access to social media coverage of election results. Social media analysis of the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election – which went to a re-run after the Supreme Electoral Council annulled the initial results – shows that the CHP opposition party bloc was vastly more successful in online media viewership compared to their AKP counterpart, with some figures putting 84% of viewership with the former and just 16% with the latter. Seeing the role media played in significantly boosting support for the opposition, in what has been called the largest political blow to Erdogan since the AKP's rise in 2002, it remains highly likely that Erdogan's government will not be repeating the same mistakes as in 2019. So, for the 2023 presidential elections, it would not be out of line for Erdogan to completely ban certain forms of media in the days immediately before and after the election. Prosecuting opposition members and civilian dissidents *en masse* for participating in vaguely-defined disinformation would also be likely, and such a show of restrictive, top-down power would not escape Erdogan.

Reprisal for this unpromising future remains scant for the Turkish population, local and international media, as well as international stakeholders. The vague construction of 'disinformation' creates a legal environment by which challenges to the legislated status quo becomes near-impossible, concretised by the judicial frameworks left in place after the 2016 coup attempt. While international human rights organisations and international media companies themselves might find greater opportunities to criticise Erodgan's media restriction over their domestic counterparts, they too are cornered into a situation whereby they comply with Türkiye's restrictive laws or risk losing coverage for over 85 million people. Meanwhile, though many inside Türkiye are turning towards VPNs – demand for VPNs increased 853% immediately following the Istiklal bombing last month – a MHP deputy has previously called for widespread bans to VPN services. While a ban was never voted on or introduced into legislation, the elimination of VPNs could be Erdogan's next target in his ever-expanding control over media and information.

Control as a Main Theme in the Middle East: Analysing Key Findings

Mariam Morsy

Control has been the dominating theme across cases studied in the report. With different intensity levels, each country has dedicated a relatively large part of its development efforts into advancing new mechanisms of media control and censorship. This dedication only shows the magnitude of impact that media can have over societies under rights-violating regimes.

The theme of censorship and media control in the Middle East indicates a number of things; ***first***, it reflects the potential threat that the media has on authoritarian regimes. As seen in this report, governments tend to block their citizens from receiving information that might be eye-opening and contradictory towards the states' ideologies. Overall, foreign media is the most censored in all cases. While local media is mostly controlled by authorities, contradicting information that can arise from foreign outlets form a potential provocation to the society against their regimes. This is seen in the cases of Iran, Syria and Türkiye, as well as others, when authorities blocked VPN services to prevent any sources of information other than theirs, which can lead to public dissatisfaction and disobedience. ***Second***, social media is also seen as an important tool for mass mobilisation. We see governments, like in Türkiye and Iran, shutting down the internet and social media platforms during crises to prevent communication between citizens, thus decreasing the possibility of mobilisation. ***Third***, regimes use the media simultaneously to spread disinformation. While blocking other sources, citizens only have state-run media outlets to rely on for information. This strategy is used to shift narratives locally, in order to gain public support, justify violations, as well as confusing and isolating citizens from reality. ***Last***, a common mechanism to control public awareness is the imposed state-defined morality over different activities. We see authorities restricting art, films and music to what it views as "moral," and using a vaguely-defined "immoral" justification to limit freedoms and violate human rights. Again, this strategy portrays regimes as the only source of morality in the eyes of their citizens, thus gaining legitimacy.

While the media is mostly state-controlled in the region, the level of intensity varies. For example, we see a difference in censorship levels between Iran and Saudi Arabia, or Egypt and Syria. These variations can determine the state of local opposition movements and how they function under the state. Apparently, opposition is highly handicapped in most of the region, but it still exists, and sometimes is able to initiate activities within the unrestricted areas that regimes draw. However, these areas seem to disappear in times of crises and uprisings. As seen in some cases, tolerated media activities become rejected when regimes feel threatened.

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