

# Building Regional Strategies for Media Development in the Middle East and North Africa

FATIMA EL-ISSAWI AND NICHOLAS BENEQUISTA

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The **Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA)**, at the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of independent media development throughout the world. The center provides information, builds networks, conducts research, and highlights the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional US private sector interest in and support for international media development.

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### Center for International Media Assistance National Endowment for Democracy

1025 F STREET, N.W., 8TH FLOOR  
WASHINGTON, DC 20004  
PHONE: (202) 378-9700  
FAX: (202) 378-9407  
EMAIL: [CIMA@ned.org](mailto:CIMA@ned.org)  
URL: <https://cima.ned.org>

**Mark Nelson**  
SENIOR DIRECTOR



**National Endowment  
for Democracy**  
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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Dr. Fatima el-Issawi** is a reader in journalism and media studies at the University of Essex. Her research focuses on the intersection of media, politics, and conflict in transitional contexts to democracy in North Africa. She is the principal investigator for the research project "Media and Transitions to Democracy: Journalistic Practices in Communicating Conflicts—the Arab Spring," funded by the British Academy's Sustainable Development Program. Since 2012, Fatima has been leading empirical comparative research projects on the interplay between media and political change covering Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, and Algeria, funded by the Open Society Foundation and the London School of Economics (LSE) Middle East Center. Fatima's expertise crosses journalism, public communication, policy, and academia. She has more than 15 years of experience as an international correspondent in conflict zones in the Middle East and North Africa region. She is the author of the *Arab National Media and Political Change*, which investigates the complex intersections between traditional journalists and politics in uncertain times of transitions to democracy in the Arab region.



**Nicholas Benequista** is a senior program specialist at the International Development Research Centre in Ottawa and was formerly associate director of the Center for International Media Assistance. Nicholas has published numerous policy reports and scholarly articles on media, citizen participation, and governance while at CIMA and in previous positions at the London School of Economics and the Institute of Development Studies. He has also worked as a journalist and development practitioner across Latin America and Africa. He has been a foreign correspondent in three countries, including as Mexico City Bureau Chief for Bloomberg News, and has helped to design and implement advocacy strategies at the local, national, and international levels. He holds a PhD in media and communications from the London School of Economics and Political Science.



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## About This Report

Over the past several years, CIMA and Deutsche Welle Akademie, alongside other partners in the field, have been organizing regional consultations that bring together a wide range of stakeholders to identify key challenges facing independent media and devise regional approaches to address them. Consultations have been held in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. In recognition of the complex and cross-cutting nature of media systems and cultures of production, these consultations include representatives of a wide range of actors, including journalists, journalist associations, regulators, legal groups, human rights organizations, policy makers, and media experts. The consultations are intended to help our partners in each region in their efforts to strengthen political support for independent media, improve methodologies for media work, and define clearer, better articulated, and effective ideas for policy reform.

This report summarizes the conclusions of the fourth such regional consultation, hosted by the Samir Kassir Foundation and the Maharat Foundation in Beirut, Lebanon, on September 16-17, 2019.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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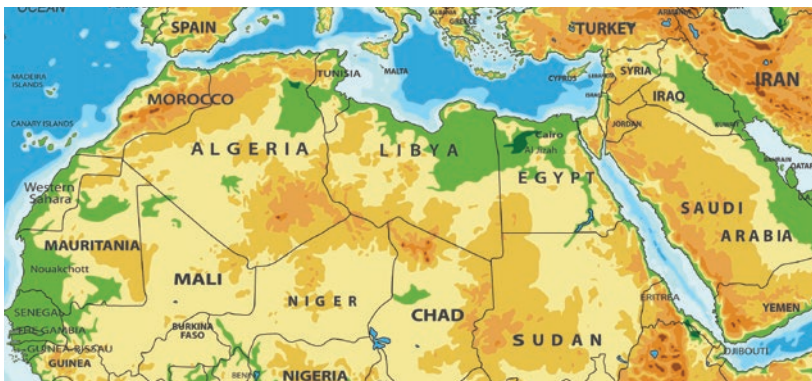
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*Protests in Jordan in 2018*



# Introduction

Around 40 prominent experts—including journalists and publishers, digital news entrepreneurs, civil society leaders, and scholars from across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)—gathered in Beirut on September 16-17, 2019. The multi-stakeholder meeting was a rare occasion for such a diverse group to formulate a shared vision for how independent journalism can continue to grow in the region despite a highly restrictive political environment and amid a revival of autocracy.<sup>1</sup>



The media community in MENA faces profound challenges. Resurgent authoritarianism, complex economic threats to media's viability, and the growing proliferation of hate speech and misinformation have made media work complicated and dangerous. In this environment, how can those on the front lines of these challenges come together to create effective strategies for concerted action to facilitate an enabling

environment for media and political pluralism and the protection of media and human rights? This was the central question the participants worked to address.

*Taking into account the complexity of the crisis and the diversity of experiences, the group agreed that cross-country networks and exchanges provide vital opportunities to learn, build partnerships, and coordinate strategies for media reforms.*

Taking into account the complexity of the crisis and the diversity of experiences, the group agreed that cross-country networks and exchanges provide vital opportunities to learn, build partnerships, and coordinate strategies for media reforms. This cross-disciplinary approach aims for a renewed vision for media development in the region, identifying priority issues, achievable goals, and joint strategies that can provide the core of a regional response.

This report summarizes the main findings and concrete recommendations for action of this regional consultation that aimed to connect and invigorate those already working to strengthen independent journalism in the region. Participant discussions also focused on the need to ensure that international support is in harmony with local priorities and to foster cooperation among national, regional, and global stakeholders that would be sustainable, innovative, and effective in bringing about change.

# The Season of Uprisings: Media and Political Reform in the MENA Region

**N**ine years after the first wave of Arab uprisings and pro-democracy movements in 2011, media in the region still face major challenges. The transition to independent and plural media systems has mirrored the broader political transitions to democratic rule, succeeding where the political sphere became open and diverse, and failing where the process of political change fell into chaos, conflicts, or more severe forms of authoritarianism.

The first wave of uprisings and street movements—which spread from Tunisia to Libya, Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen—failed to achieve sustainable, peaceful, and meaningful change for those who took to the streets demanding freedom and dignity. Instead, this first wave of movements was followed by counterrevolutions in the region, resulting in unprecedented forms of repression of rights and freedoms. Tunisia remains the one exception as it continues to undergo a peaceful and inclusive transition, although with immense economic difficulties and fragile security conditions. The 2019 elections, which brought a new president and parliament to power, have been a testament to the ability of the country to overcome divisions in a democratic manner but also indicated a growing discontent, especially among the youth, with dire economic conditions and widespread corruption. The presidential victory by a conservative law professor, a political outsider who was elected with overwhelming support from younger voters, was interpreted as a severe indictment of how the mainstream political parties have conducted the transition so far.<sup>2</sup>

The second wave of street movements has renewed hope in a new “spring” that would bring peaceful, inclusive, and lasting political change. Rooted in socioeconomic grievances, the waves of protests in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon that erupted in 2019 have since given rise to political demands, most notably ending the widespread networks of corruption and holding corrupt actors to account.

In Algeria, the ailing 82-year-old Abdelaziz Bouteflika declined to run for a fifth term as president of the country. Growing bolder and succeeding in expanding its base, the civilian resistance, or *Harak*, has yet to dislodge military command over politics and governance in the country.<sup>3</sup> In Sudan, mass protest led to a transitional government



Demonstration against Abdelaziz Bouteflika's fifth term as president of Algeria, March 2019

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Public Domain / Voice of America

Sudanese protesters gather in front of government buildings in Khartoum in 2019.

*In Sudan, mass protest led to a transitional government after the military overthrew the al-Bashir regime.*

after the military overthrew the al-Bashir regime. The joint military-civilian administration is still facing crucial challenges, above all the organization of a democratic election to restore civilian rule, currently scheduled for 2022.<sup>4</sup> In Lebanon, a swift and widespread popular movement triggered by a tax on WhatsApp voice calls turned into a national and radical call to topple the sectarian system, rallying around the slogan “All Means All.” This unprecedented rebellion by the Lebanese, especially Lebanese youth, against their sectarian leaders finds its *raison d’être* in the anger of a population about longstanding economic stagnation, endemic corruption, and a lack of basic public services in a country at the edge of an economic collapse.<sup>5</sup> Rooted in long-standing grievances over poor governance and corruption, a similar anti-sectarian popular movement has erupted in Iraq, where it has been met with lethal force.

# Media and Political Pluralism Before and After the Uprisings

**T**he Arab uprisings, which are ongoing and evolving movements for change, represent an important shift in power. One of the major gains of these movements, which used digital platforms to challenge dominant discourses, was an unprecedented pluralism in mainstream media and politics. Pluralism refers to a citizen's right to access a broad range of different political views, perspectives, and cultural expressions as a fundamental value in media policy. Pluralism is a cornerstone of a democratic public sphere.<sup>6</sup>

This pluralism has been mainly reflected in the mushrooming of political parties and alternative movements, a booming civil society, and the proliferation of private media groups (although with a high degree of parallelism with politics<sup>7</sup>), including innovative partnerships between professional media and social media activism and alternative media projects.

Yet, this openness in the public sphere has retracted in contexts where the political transition failed to achieve a genuine change or collapsed into autocracy or violent unrest. Gains were protected in a few countries—mainly Tunisia—where this pluralism has been institutionalized and civil society played a crucial role in supporting the fragile process of democratization. The role of civil society in revitalizing the Arab public sphere, however, has received considerably less attention than the mechanism of power and elite control, which largely predominated. Although the new openness managed to shake outdated and largely restrictive structures, media reform was not institutionalized in structures and practices in most of the region's countries.



Adèle Ezine / Xinhua / Alamy Live News

*Protests in Tunisia in 2018*



## Gains in Media Democratization and Government Reforms

**T**he Arab media landscape has witnessed diversification in platforms and content, though the dynamism has attenuated in recent years with growing restrictions, fragmentation, and economic hardship. In societies that were once closed, the new pluralism has also come with its own challenges. Sensational coverage has blurred the line between information and rumor and is used by the new and old political elites alike to distract from tackling crucial issues. Antagonistic coverage has exacerbated social and political divides.

Though no government in the region has made press freedom and media development a priority, some recent partial achievements are worth noting.



*Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan, for example, have joined the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a formalized multi-stakeholder process. Under the OGP, government officials and civil society leaders come together to create national action plans to make governments more inclusive, responsive, and accountable.*

- Freedom of expression and basic media rights are guaranteed in almost all constitutions in the region. However, these rights are largely denied by legislation and in practice.
- Prison sentences for journalists for professional offenses have been largely, though not entirely, abolished from press codes, although journalists can still face such measures under penal or specialized laws.<sup>8</sup>
- Independent regulators for the broadcast sector have been institutionalized in some countries, including Tunisia, but these regulators continue to struggle when it comes to independence and efficiency.
- The constitutions and laws of the region now largely recognize that journalists and the general public have a right to information, though those trying to exercise that right face many obstacles.
- Tunisia continues to maintain a positive ranking in media rights and civil liberties, being the only Arab country ranked as “free” by Freedom House. However, journalists continue to face pressure and intimidation from government officials in doing their job, especially in the coverage of topics and events related to security forces.<sup>9</sup>
- The reform of state media broadcasters into public service media has achieved important progress in Tunisia as part of the general media reform, but it remains hampered by a lack of political will as well as structural and professional barriers within those institutions in the broader region.





Simon Kremer / dpa picture alliance / Alamy Live News

*Protests in Tunisia in 2017*

Reform-minded governments, in some cases facing pressure to deliver electoral promises and in others looking to improve their international standing, are seeking to make policy and public services more effective through public engagement and accountability. Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan, for example, have joined the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a formalized multi-stakeholder process. Under the OGP, government officials and civil society leaders come together to create national action plans to make governments more inclusive, responsive, and accountable.<sup>10</sup> In Lebanon, civil society and government officials launched the Lebanon Internet Governance Forum, a multi-stakeholder initiative devoted to open, inclusive and transparent dialogue on internet governance issues which also provides a platform for Lebanon to engage more effectively with global debates on internet governance.<sup>11</sup> However, these multi-stakeholder forums have yet to bring solutions to the obstacles journalists still face in their daily practices such as access to information, protection of sources, sustainable economic conditions for independent media and genuine implementation of media rights and safety for journalists.<sup>12</sup>

# Major Barriers and Setbacks for Media and Political Reforms

**T**he Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is home to some of the lowest-ranking countries in the world for press freedom: Sudan, South Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Syria, and Somalia.<sup>13</sup> Bad as the situation in the region has been historically, press freedom has been getting worse since about 2013.<sup>14</sup> The deteriorating conditions for press freedom in the MENA region, however, were not an exception during this period, which saw a decline in the rights of journalists globally.



Activists and journalists hold portraits of Jamal Khashoggi.

*Around the world, about 550 journalists were killed in the decade ending in 2020; nearly half of those deaths were in the MENA region. The 2018 murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul by an assassination squad was one of the most infamous of these cases.*

Safety for journalists and rampant impunity remain major concerns, especially for journalists working in conflict zones, including Syria, Libya, Yemen, the West Bank and Gaza, and Iraq. Around the world, about 550 journalists were killed in the decade ending in 2020; nearly half of those deaths were in the MENA region.<sup>15</sup> The 2018 murder of *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul by an assassination squad was one of the most infamous of these cases. Pressure, intimidation, and attacks are becoming daily challenges for journalists in almost all countries in the region. These include raids on press syndicates and journalists' private homes,<sup>16</sup> expulsion of foreign journalists, prolonged detention of local journalists, military tribunal trials of journalists, confiscation of passports and bans on traveling abroad, denial of authorizations to cover particular events, closures of press publications, and blocking of online news outlets.<sup>17</sup>

New anti-terror laws are a prominent tool used by governments to deter critical reporting. Broad and vaguely worded provisions such as "encouragement of terrorism" and "praising," "glorifying," or "justifying" terrorism enable the prosecution of journalists in the name of national security and fighting terrorism.<sup>18</sup> Scores of activists and journalists are today behind bars accused of belonging to terror groups or threatening national security.<sup>19</sup> In other cases, journalists are detained in unknown locations or simply disappeared with no information about their fate.<sup>20</sup>

The MENA region also receives exceptionally low scores for online freedom, though the region is not exceptional in witnessing a decline in those scores over the past decade. According to data from Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report, MENA is facing new forms of online repression that are also becoming common in other parts of the world.<sup>21</sup> Journalists, bloggers, and social media users face growing

restrictions on freedom of expression online, through physical attacks, prison sentences, illegal detention, prosecutions, and closure of websites.<sup>22</sup> Restrictive stipulations in penal codes, new anti-terror legislation, and other legal tools muzzle critical reporting.<sup>23</sup> New cybercrime laws are increasingly used to deter dissent in the digital space, as part of growing trends to limit freedom of expression online.<sup>24</sup> This is in line with a growing global trend of regression in freedoms online.<sup>25</sup> Globally, 27 percent of all internet users live in countries where people have been arrested for publishing, sharing, or merely “liking” content on Facebook.<sup>26</sup> The recent detention of Moroccan journalist and activist Omar Radi for a tweet in which he criticized the judiciary’s extremely tough sentences against street protesters is an example of the growing war by regimes against expressions of dissent on social media.<sup>27</sup>

In some countries, the use of moral denigration against critical journalists and civil rights activists, including through politically motivated legal cases related to journalists’ private affairs, muzzles critical reporting and other forms of dissent. The 2019 prison sentence given to Moroccan journalist Hajar Raissouni for an alleged abortion and premarital sex is one such example and an alarming development. (Notably, Raissouni and her fiancé were pardoned by the king following a public outcry.<sup>28</sup>)

Violence and legal harassment are not the only tools used to target independent journalists in the region. Coercive regimes use a combination of weapons to curtail critical reporting: restrictive regulations, impunity for security agencies, manipulation of the judiciary, and economic pressures. Even in countries that formally recognize press freedom or where the media are less controlled by the state, media outlets still struggle to achieve genuine autonomy owing to economic hardship and weak sustainability. Additionally, in many of these countries, growing “political parallelism”—in which news outlets take sides in a polarized political environment—means that media narratives are still hijacked by political agendas, with citizens receiving distorted, false, or incomplete information.



Evren Kalınbacak / Shutterstock.com

*New cybercrime laws are increasingly used to deter dissent in the digital space, as part of growing trends to limit freedom of expression online.*

# Major Trends in the Media Sector: Independent Media as a Platform for Resistance

**T**he region is home to diverse media systems, each a product of a unique historical and cultural context. Still, some regional trends exist: a tendency toward political control of media outlets and an arsenal of legal restrictions to quell critical reporting. New, more promising, trends have also emerged across the region. The media landscape has seen burgeoning media advocacy and media development initiatives with regional activities and impact.



*The region has also seen the rise of a new generation of independent news websites providing regional coverage and tackling taboos in the political, social, and religious arenas.*

The region has also seen the rise of a new generation of independent news websites providing regional coverage and tackling taboos in the political, social, and religious arenas. *Mada Masr* news website provides critical reporting from inside Cairo despite frequent retaliation and closure,<sup>29</sup> and Tunisia's *Inkyfada*, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), has developed "a web magazine specialized in investigation and data-journalism, created by a team of journalists, developers, and graphic designers."<sup>30</sup> *Daraj.com*,<sup>31</sup> *Raseef22*,<sup>32</sup> *Le Desk*,<sup>33</sup> and *Sasapost*<sup>34</sup> are among the many other recent start-ups.

These projects have asserted their independence from power holders by developing business models that are not reliant on political funding and business interests. Most of these news websites are funded by a mix of international donations, advertisement, and subscriptions revenues—and most struggle to sustain themselves. Reaching larger audiences will be important for these newcomers to find their place in the region's media landscape and compete with much larger mass media outlets.

## Why Media Reform Movements Have Not Developed in the Region

The Arab public sphere is increasingly dynamic in spite of resurgent autocracy in most of the region's countries. While authoritarians seek to manipulate the media as a tool for sowing divisions and vilifying dissenters, awareness is growing among journalists of their important role as democratic agents. A divide is deepening within the journalistic community between those championing human rights and accountability and those who effectively act as the regimes' publicists.<sup>35</sup>

Arab civil society has been reinvigorated by recent protest movements bringing together citizens from different sectors and walks of life around shared social, political, or environmental grievances. This new energy





Claudia Wiens / Alamy Stock Photo

has spread through trade groups, student and women's unions, human rights groups, and youth associations. It has emboldened independent media projects with daring investigative agendas. The phenomenon of the *Harak* (a street movement demanding change) seen in Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, Algeria, Morocco, and elsewhere in the region is a testament to civil society's ability to exert pressure on structures and policies. These movements are unleashing a torrent of creativity through songs, graffiti, slogans, street initiatives, and more.

Though innovative in many regards, these national movements still face strong co-optation by the state and difficulties working across political and ideological lines, especially when it comes to civil and women's rights. These ideological and political fractures diminish the democratizing potential of Arab civil society.<sup>36</sup>

Multi-stakeholder coalitions have also emerged at the national level, including in the media sector in some cases. The National Union for Tunisian Journalists (*Syndicat national des journalistes tunisiens*), to name one example, has brought together civil society groups and journalists in the fight for media and human rights in general. More than 90 organizations and civil society groups in Tunisia came together in July 2018 by issuing a Pact for Equality and Individual Freedoms, confirming a commitment to civilian and democratic rule in the country.<sup>37</sup> The feminist movement in Lebanon<sup>38</sup> is thriving and includes efforts to reach out to different sectors of society and branches of government, including the judiciary.<sup>39</sup> The Syrian Female Journalists Network (SFJN) seeks to build bridges between media and the Syrian women's movement by empowering female journalists to take leading positions and by raising awareness on gender equality and women's issues.<sup>40</sup>

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Similarly, the Iraqi Women Journalists Forum<sup>41</sup> is championing women's empowerment in the public sphere and in the work place, especially in the media sector. These are only a few examples, and they do not capture the diversity and richness of societal engagement in the region.

In addition to national initiatives, collaboration is taking place at the regional level. For instance, the Arab NGOs Network for Development acts as "an independent, democratic, and civic organization that aims at strengthening civil society and enhancing the values of democracy and respect of human rights and sustainable development in the Arab region."<sup>42</sup> The Arab Network for Democratic Elections is concerned with the transparency of electoral processes, bringing together several nongovernmental organizations from the Arab region.<sup>43</sup>

Some more traditional regional bodies continue to act in support of media rights, but without much success bringing attention to the hardships encountered by Arab journalists. Two such initiatives are the Arab Press Network, managed by the World Association of Newspapers, with its headquarters in Paris, and the Federation of Arab Journalists, which was established in 1964 in Cairo under the name *Union des journalistes arabes*. Both have sought to create a platform for collaboration among Arab journalists and to link them to international efforts to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of the profession.<sup>44</sup> These platforms lack representation among journalists and suffer from weak effectiveness.

More recently, regional initiatives have mushroomed, such as the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), a legal body that brings together "lawyers and researchers working on defending Freedom of Expression in Egypt and the Arab world, especially Freedom of the Press as a gateway to empower and give access to the rest of human rights."<sup>45</sup> The International Journalists' Network (IJNet) provides mentoring and training for start-ups.<sup>46</sup> The Samir Kassir Foundation is active mainly in monitoring and documenting violations perpetrated against journalists in the Levant region and providing support, including safe housing, for Arab journalists in distress,<sup>47</sup> and the Maharat Foundation has developed specific expertise in media regulation reform and has played a leading role on issues of media viability, with particular focus on alternative business models.<sup>48</sup> The Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ), based in Amman, Jordan, provides an important platform for training and for networking in support of investigative reporting in the region.<sup>49</sup>

Civil society in the region has acquired capacities to build coalitions nationally, regionally, and internationally in various fields: poverty alleviation, women's rights, environmental protection, human rights, and more. Links with global initiatives have been established through the Global Partnership for Education,<sup>50</sup> the World Alliance for Citizen Participation

through the Civic Space Initiative (CIVICUS),<sup>51</sup> and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Global Action Program on Education for Sustainable Development.<sup>52</sup> The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) Middle East and Arab World office supports 20 affiliated unions and associations in the region.<sup>53</sup>

Despite civil society dynamism, obstacles remain in MENA that prevent the kinds of media movements seen in other regions, where media actors and civil society groups have come together to defend accurate, democratic, and pluralist communication as a basic human right.<sup>54</sup> Those obstacles include:

- Weak solidarity between media and civil society groups in defense of the right for a democratic communication.
- Weak or inadequate structures to facilitate such collaboration between media and civil society.
- The lack of solidarity between journalists, especially in defending journalists who are under attack by regimes or non-state actors.<sup>55</sup>
- Low trust in media, with national audiences perceiving outlets as serving the interests of the powerful and lacking professionalism.<sup>56</sup>
- Weak or inadequate unions and professional associations, with some of these bodies co-opted by ruling regimes.
- Restrictive regulations limiting the activities of civil society groups and threatening them with drastic measures such as closure or prosecution.<sup>57</sup>
- The lack of an enabling environment allowing groups and individuals to convene freely while respecting the diversity of civil society actors.

The Beirut consultation confirmed the need to strengthen collaborative action between media and civil society groups, while stressing the need to build genuine connections, not just assembled for tactical reasons or short-term program goals but rooted in common values. They also stressed the importance that regional collaboration be led by a vision developed by national actors, rather than defined and imposed by donor agendas and priorities. The lack of rooted, bottom-up network-building has been a shortcoming in the past; networks built top-down have not survived. The discussions held in Beirut, and summarized in the rest of this report, focused on how to do better.

How can collaboration among proponents of democratic politics in the region help to shift the politics, economics, and policies that ultimately shape the media sector? What strategies can address the root causes of the problems in the media sector? The meeting discussed major barriers and opportunities for a collaborative response to identify the best pathways to collective action.



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# Building Sustainable Coalitions for an Enabling Media Environment

Participants defined four major areas in which collective action is crucial to help support the development of an enabling environment for independent journalistic practices.



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*Private media owners aligned with regimes have purchased some news outlets outright, whereas clientelism and other complex forms of co-optation give vested interests control over media narratives in more subtle ways.*

## Fighting Media Capture: Transparency, Policy Pressure, and Public Education

The opening of the media sector to private ownership in recent years contributed to the diversification of media coverage. However, in most cases, this has followed established patterns of captured media ownership.<sup>58</sup> Private media owners aligned with regimes have purchased some news outlets outright, whereas clientelism and other complex forms of co-optation give vested interests control over media narratives in more subtle ways. The recent decision of the military in Egypt to indirectly purchase media outlets is greatly alarming as it constitutes an unprecedented incursion by security into private media.<sup>59</sup>

Media capture is one of the major obstacles to sustainable independent journalism practice. A recent UNESCO report has flagged as a growing threat “the politicized fragmentation of the media sphere and the intensifying sectarian nature of media content, contributing to divisiveness rather than a respect for difference.”<sup>60</sup> There is a lack of information on media ownership and funding in the MENA region. Detailed data and case studies are scarce. The Media Ownership Monitor (MOM) indicators developed by Reporters without Borders (RSF) and the Center for Media Data and Society’s Media Influence Matrix Project are among the few thorough resources on the topic, but these initiatives currently cover only five MENA countries: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia.

In Egypt, RSF denounced a “Sisification” (referring to President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi) of the media sector through a hostile takeover by the secret services and a few wealthy owners loyal to the regime. The domination of the print and broadcast sectors by the Egyptian Media Group, now directly controlled by the secret services, has meant that those looking for diverse perspectives have to turn to very few remaining independent online media outlets and platforms.



Similar concentration is found in the Lebanese media sector, which is dominated by just a few owners who are either linked to political parties or who belong to political dynasties. The media sector is concentrated in the hands of eight families and three political parties.<sup>61</sup> While the media ownership reflects the political and sectarian diversity in the country, interference in editorial decision-making, including from regional powers, is rampant.

The Moroccan media sector is directly linked to the government, the state, or the royal family through large media groups. Large investments in media from leading business figures are of questionable intent, given that media outlets make limited or no financial profit. The state is the leading owner in the broadcast sector, while print is split between privately owned Arabic and French language outlets (the latter being on the wane). Online media ownership is the most fragmented. While the level of threat to media pluralism is rated as medium, the study found that the sector is largely under the control of the royal family or powerful businessmen and government ministers.<sup>62</sup>

In Tunisia, the nascent diversity in the media after former President Ben Ali's fall from power did not lead to reliable and independent information, with media dominated by political and economic interests and a lack of transparency with regard to funding.<sup>63</sup>

With capture of the media sector a widespread and fundamental challenge in many countries in the region, participants agreed that a multi-disciplinary and cross-border approach to the issue should be a priority. Their recommendations include:

- Expanding and strengthening existing efforts to document ownership structures and regulation in the region, using Center for Media Data and Society's Media Influence Matrix Project or RSF's Media Ownership Monitor as models. Participants noted that MOM provides a tested methodology, but felt that its indicators could be refined and its scope expanded. For instance, MOM and other initiatives could distinguish more effectively between diversity of content and diversity of media outlets, explore indicators of more complex forms of collusions or clientelism, and expand to cover more forms of media funding. There is also a need to expand to cover more MENA countries.
- The region would further benefit from joint policy positions, directed at key actors in the state and private sectors, with regard to how to respond to the challenges of media sector ownership and funding. The research and joint policy positions would strengthen existing work in the region, including the Maharat Foundation's efforts to build capacity in the region on media regulatory reforms.



*With capture of the media sector a widespread and fundamental challenge in many countries in the region, participants agreed that a multi-disciplinary and cross-border approach to the issue should constitute a priority.*



*No one-size-fits-all approach to sustainability will work in a region that comprises liberal, illiberal, and hybrid regimes: different regimes imply the need for different business models.*

- Drawing from the research and joint policy positions, a collaborative effort could be made to raise the public awareness on the dangers of political control over media narratives and the capture of media operations. These media mapping studies could be popularized and promoted to sensitize the public about the importance of transparent and well-regulated media ownership and funding.

Participants identified potential allies who could assist efforts to promote greater diversity and transparency in media ownership and funding. These include:

- Liberal-minded businessmen and women who could be potential funders of independent media enterprises.
- Academic institutions and research centers, which could assist in developing rigorous and transparent indicators of media ownership and produce case studies and comparative analysis. These actors can also play an important role in promoting public awareness on these issues.
- Independent political parties and influential personalities who can help to formulate strategic policy positions and to add pressure for fair and transparent policy making.
- Civil society groups who can work together with media stakeholders in organizing and implementing coordinated awareness-raising and advocacy campaigns at national and regional levels.

## Promoting Economic Sustainability for Independent Media Under Threat

Questions of sustainability and public trust in the news media are not unique to the MENA region. Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report 2019* found that the number of readers paying for online news is only growing in a handful of rich countries.<sup>64</sup> Even there, subscription growth is slow, and the vast majority of readers have only one online subscription. Across the globe, the average level of trust in the news continues to fall, dropping two percentage points (to 42 percent) from two years prior. Concern about misinformation and disinformation remains strong,<sup>65</sup> while political and clickbait news further alienate some would-be news consumers.<sup>66</sup>

However, challenges faced by media in the MENA region in sustaining resources are wider and more complex. With coercion and violence against journalists on the rise, weak sustainability is one of many factors threatening the fragile pluralism of the media sector in the region. Furthermore, no one-size-fits-all approach will work in a region that

comprises liberal, illiberal, and hybrid regimes: different regimes imply the need for different business models. The workforce looks dramatically different across the region as well, with newsrooms in some countries welcoming of female reporters, while others are hostile environments for women. Other media outlets operate in countries affected by conflict, such as Syria and Yemen. Over 140 newspapers have emerged in Libya post-Gaddafi, but most of them stopped publishing on a regular basis as a result of the ongoing armed conflict in the country.<sup>67</sup>

In this complex environment, what steps can be taken to ensure funding for truly independent reporting—autonomous journalism that abides by professional standards and is not dictated by political agendas?

The region boasts a range of experiences on the diversification of revenues and collaborative networks and alliances. *Voix Du Liban*, a private radio station in Lebanon, has emphasized the importance of developing partnerships with international stations to benefit from their experiences. Such networks can include sharing content, partnerships with local and international NGOs producing programs, producing specific content for funding institutions, in addition to media packages provided through annual contracts. The Daraj independent news website, which is funded by international donations, has developed a subscriptions model and built partnerships around sharing content with the aim of diversifying revenues and limiting costs.<sup>68</sup> Funded also by international grants, the Syrian news website *Enab Baladi*, one of very few providing news reporting from inside the country,<sup>69</sup> built a partnership with a Kurdish media outlet benefitting from access to Kurdish audiences. They have also managed to coproduce content with another partner, allowing them to limit costs and gain access to larger audiences.

Building sustainability for new and well-established independent media projects will require creative solutions, collaboration between actors that serve common needs and targets, and a thoughtful and collective engagement with the changes occasioned by digital media. This is complicated in the MENA region, however, by persistent tensions between digital news start-ups and legacy media. The participants recognized the need to build coalitions that are inclusive of all independent actors within the contemporary communication sphere.

Participants stressed the need to build a collective structure that will allow media projects in the region to acquire a strong voice in internet governance through pressuring policy makers and opening channels of dialogue with influential platforms such as Google and Facebook. This dialogue would need to address two key issues. First, the challenges faced by independent media projects to access advertising revenue



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through these platforms, and second, terms of service that are abused by governments and political actors to censor critical content on platforms — an alarming practice that is on the rise.<sup>70</sup>

Building these relationships of trust could also open the way to scale up business partnerships that are experimenting with collaborative production of content, shared subscriptions, and sharing advertising revenues. These measures, still not widespread in the region, can not only help media outlets access larger audiences but also reduce production costs, expand revenues, and put them in a stronger position to push back against potential political threats and pressure. Media outlets can also diversify their revenues by offering specialized services, including journalism training, and renting their facilities for events and conferences.<sup>71</sup> These partnerships at the operational level are beneficial in maximizing the efficient use of resources and bolstering quality investigative reporting across the region.

Participants stressed the need to review the relationship with donors in order to make it more efficient, sustainable, and less dependent on the donors' agendas and interests. Participants acknowledged the challenges of guaranteeing the sustainability of their projects. However, the need for core funding from donors continues to be crucial to allow these projects to enjoy some level of stability and clarity within a fluid, uncertain, and quite often restrictive environment. This core funding is essential in creating the enabling environment needed for independent media to thrive. The funding strategies for donors should take into consideration the importance of local and smaller media projects such as community radio and not only the larger national media projects.

On the basis of the issues discussed above, the participants outlined a series of shared objectives and goals that could constitute the basis of future collaboration:

- Coordinate through existing membership groups and networks to develop collective positions on internet governance and its implications for media sustainability, and to better communicate a MENA position on these issues in global fora and in future dialogue with major internet platforms.
- Work through existing membership groups and networks to bring greater transparency to international assistance directed toward media sector actors and to more effectively lobby donors on the need for more flexible funding modalities, including core funding.
- Create opportunities for independent media peers in the region to share knowledge on opportunities for diversification of income and alternative business models and to explore possibilities



for collaborations on content creation to reduce costs and increase audience.

- Academic studies that provide accurate information on funding schemes and alternative business models.
- Financial support from progressive businesspeople who can play a crucial role in boosting independent media sustainability.
- Developing specialized platforms can help track funding by providing information on grants in real time to help media groups stay tuned to funding opportunities.
- Building channels of dialogue with platforms can help form consensus on a model allowing media start-ups and independent small media projects to earn a greater percentage of the platforms' advertising revenues.

## Improving Self-Regulation: Capacity Building and Ethical Norms

With antagonistic narratives propagated in media and hate speech and misinformation growing at an alarming rate, participants agreed that questions of ethics and weak professionalism are more important than ever. Media need to restore the public's trust by adhering to agreed professional standards and a meaningful process of reviewing practices.

Following the first wave of uprisings, several regulatory bodies were established to oversee the broadcast media sector, but they suffer from poorly defined mandates and a lack of independence from executive power—indeed, some of them act as new gatekeepers to control media. Other regulatory bodies predated these movements. For instance, the Lebanese National Council for Audiovisual Media (*al-Majlis al-watani li-l-l'am al-mar'y w-al-masmu'*), created in 1994 to oversee respect for the media law passed that year, is largely perceived to be ineffective in monitoring and sanctioning violations against the press. It suffers from limited independence as its members are chosen mainly along sectarian lines.<sup>72</sup> In Morocco, The *Haute Autorité de la Communication Audiovisuelle* (High Authority for Audiovisual Communication, HACA) is entrusted to guarantee the application of laws and regulations governing the broadcast sector.<sup>73</sup> Although created as an independent administrative body, it is placed under the tutelage of the king, who names five of its members, including the body's president, with no time limitation on their mandate.<sup>74</sup>



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*Media need to restore the public's trust by adhering to agreed professional standards and a meaningful process of reviewing practices.*



*Almost every country in the region has a code of ethics for journalists, though in most countries, these codes are not implemented or they are co-opted as a tool for state propaganda, with vague wording and, in some cases, restrictive stipulations like the obligation to respect national security.*

In Egypt, the 2018 Law on the Organization of Press, Media, and the Supreme Council of Media gives this council extensive power. Largely appointed by the president, the council has the power to block journalistic web pages, social media accounts, or any personal web page with more than 5,000 followers.<sup>75</sup> The Supreme Council can also ban publications from abroad on grounds of “national security,” and prohibits journalists from reporting on certain investigations and trials, among other restrictions.

In Tunisia, it is envisaged that the current Independent Audio-Visual Communication Authority (*Haute autorité indépendante de la Communication audio-visuelle*, HAICA) will be replaced by the new Audio-Visual Communication Commission. The draft law establishing this new entity does not specifically guarantee its functional independence in its financial, operational, and administrative practice.<sup>76</sup> That the Commission members are elected by the National Assembly (the Tunisian parliament) has also raised fears of political and economic co-optation and possible control by the ruling party.

Almost every country in the region has a code of ethics for journalists, though in most countries, these codes are not implemented or they are co-opted as a tool for state propaganda, with vague wording and, in some cases, restrictive stipulations like the obligation to respect national security. Participants agreed on the need to develop an effective self-regulatory mechanism for news producers, including online news sites. Participants also agreed that the pathway to better self-regulation should be inspired by successful experiences and lessons learned and should actively involve journalists in drafting codes of ethics, including developing a complaint and reward mechanism, independent of governmental structures. They acknowledged that such system could only be effective when accompanied by an efficient mechanism of implementation to which newsrooms would commit on a voluntarily basis. This structure would enable journalists to enjoy a more secure position in the face of pressures and intimidations, including lobbying for better press codes and information laws that would meet international standards.

This effort could be expanded to involve schools of journalism, which could develop their curriculum in order to include current cutting-edge debates on the place of journalism in society. On a practical level, for this new structure to take shape, participants agreed on the need to work with existing bodies of self-regulation such as journalist unions and regional and international bodies working to raise awareness on ethical issues and train journalists. These efforts, of course, must take

into consideration the abuse of the media for spreading disinformation and hate speech, but also the use of “fake news” as an excuse to jail dissenting voices. Most importantly, there is a need for a cultural change toward self-regulation among journalists, and for raising awareness among journalists and the larger public on its crucial role in safeguarding journalism quality and independence.

One important global platform for networking and knowledge exchange is the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI),<sup>77</sup> launched by Reporters Without Borders with the aim of “defining indicators for trustworthy journalism and to cater to a healthy information space at large.” The initiative, to which the organization has opened a public consultation,<sup>78</sup> established standards developed by 120 experts and industry representatives to support voluntary compliance from media outlets and stakeholders. It proposes indicators for trustworthy sources of information and a benchmark for ethical conduct and transparency.<sup>79</sup>

Article 19’s MENA regional office is also engaged in efforts to promote self-regulation. Most recently, the organization launched its Alliance Article 32 initiative for the defense of the right to access to information and access to social networks. This alliance aims to bring together public and private sectors, journalists, scholars, and governmental bodies to lobby for the respect of Article 32 of the Tunisian constitution guaranteeing these rights.<sup>80</sup> The organization is currently working to create a multi-stakeholder accountability mechanism for content moderation on social media. The project aims to provide an open, transparent, accountable, and participatory forum to address content moderation issues on social media platforms on the basis of international standards on human rights and with voluntarily compliance. This experience in Tunisia can be instructive for the entire region.

Many ideas were discussed at the Beirut consultation for bolstering ethics and professionalism in the region, though the participants agreed on two priority goals for this area.

- Build opportunities for regional exchange and peer-to-peer learning on approaches to regulation and self-regulation. This could be facilitated by a database of expertise from the region for networking, advocacy, and research. Some proposed holding an annual conference to support an ongoing work plan on this issue.
- Further regional work on frameworks for voluntary ethical standards, which could engage with and borrow from global efforts such as the Journalism Trust Initiative.



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*Amid growing state dominance and repression, participants called for continued solidarity among media groups and continued efforts to condemn attacks against journalists.*

Potential allies identified for these activities include:

- International and regional organizations working in the field of self-regulation and quality journalism;
- International and regional organizations providing professional and safety training and support for journalists;
- Journalists' syndicates and other nonprofit organizations working to support independent journalism;
- Genuinely independent regulatory bodies that provide oversight that media outlets are acting in the public good and not under undue influence of the government;
- Reform-minded influencers in governments and parliaments to communicate the importance of free press and freedom of information within the government and to public;
- Legal experts to provide advisory information on how to protect independent, plural, and media friendly structures and practices; and
- Schools of journalism that can help produce the next cadre of independent journalists by revamping their curricula to teach modern ethical standards that take into account contemporary challenges posed by the move to digital media.

## Building Stronger Solidarity Against Repression and for Reform

Participants agreed that the wide scope of challenges facing journalists and media groups in the MENA region necessitates a bold, diverse, and multi-layered strategy: a bolder stance against repression through orchestrated campaigns in defense of media rights, including on social media, and stronger channels for dialogue with reform-minded lawmakers and officials.<sup>81</sup> For more independent narratives to prevail it will require better cooperation between legacy and digital media in fighting for their rights, regardless of medium.

Amid growing state dominance and repression, participants called for solidarity among media groups and continued efforts to condemn attacks against journalists. Such acts of regional defense have occurred in the recent past. For example, the security raid against *Mada Masr*'s offices, one of few critical media platforms remaining in Egypt, and the arrest of their journalists, was met with condemnation among journalists and human rights activists across the region, and used as an opportunity to highlight the dire condition of journalism in Egypt.<sup>82</sup> This solidarity could be better coordinated to provide support and protection to journalists, while connecting them to international networks and initiatives.



Networking with international platforms is crucial as it would strengthen journalists' resilience in facing oppression and allow them to enjoy protection through global recognition.<sup>83</sup> One important international initiative is the UNESCO-led Global Media Defense Fund, launched recently in London to support the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists, with initial funding from the United Kingdom and Canada. The fund provides legal advice and security training for reporters working in situations of conflict and otherwise in danger, including from autocratic regimes.<sup>84</sup>

The meeting proposed several initiatives that can bring together capacities and expertise to support journalists' solidarity against repression:

- Collective campaigns for legislative reforms to limit the use of restrictive legislation against media, including unlawful violations by security agents;
- Protect journalists against forms of violence while performing their jobs and end impunity for those perpetrators;
- Build alliances with social media platforms to review their policies in blocking critical content;



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*Participants stressed the importance of a collaborative action in documenting violations against media and those perpetrated by media against the public.*

- Develop a regional mechanism to document abuses and violations against media and by media in real time; and
- Build alliances with international bodies active in the defense of journalists in the region, such as the Committee to Protect Journalists.

While efforts for defending journalism and human rights are not new in the region, there is a need to bring those actors together in order to maximize impact. Some participants proposed an international fund to protect journalists who are targets of coercive regimes. A communication network between organizations could be helpful in sharing information on these journalists, thus supporting their resilience and providing them with protection via recognition.

Participants stressed the importance of a collaborative action in documenting violations against the media and those perpetrated by the media against the public. This monitoring mechanism should cover the region and be accompanied by advocacy campaigns as well as providing legal aid—an idea could be to create a regional network of lawyers providing legal support—for targeted journalists or media outlets. This alliance would build sub-regional groups given the scope of abuses and their variation from one country to another, and maximize opportunities to learn from experiences. It is well known that dictators learn from each other in ways to oppress independent media. Supporters of independent media, too, must work together to counter this oppression. Advocates need to act to resist political control of media, including by providing legal support, spearheading campaigns against restrictive regulations, and pushing for an end to impunity in crimes and abuses committed against journalists. Raising public awareness on the crucial importance of accurate, quality, and plural information is essential to achieving and safeguarding an independent media.

## Conclusions

**A**mid resurgent autocracy, journalists and defenders of media freedom in the MENA region are pushing back. The Beirut consultation was an important step toward bringing together often disparate efforts at resistance and reform into greater solidarity with a focus on achieving results.

Media movements—alliances between media actors and civil society—are crucial today in confronting the immense forms of repression, pressures, and intimidations endured by journalists in their daily practices and to protect the public right to quality, accurate, and plural information in the region. This consultation identified priority issues in the media sector and strategies for addressing them collectively. The meeting is just one important step in the complex process of formulating a vision for change—one that would bring together important stakeholders in media and civil society to foster an environment that supports independent journalism through tangible action.

Participants identified four major areas where collective action would be crucial, with the support of international media assistance, to build sustainable, strategic, and goal-focused networks that can transcend country differences and bring together regional media stakeholders around shared values. Today, in response to the complex crises facing media in MENA, defenders of free expression and independent media in the region can implement concrete strategies and actions to build on present efforts and take them to new horizons.



*The meeting is just one important step in the complex process of formulating a vision for change to bring together important stakeholders in media and civil society to foster an environment that supports independent journalism through tangible action.*

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- <sup>53</sup> International Federation of Journalists, "Middle East & Arab World," <https://www.ifj.org/where/middle-east-arab-world/ifj-middle-east-arab-world.html>.
- <sup>54</sup> Segura, Maria Soledad and Waisbord, Silvio, 2016, *Media Movements: Civil Society and Media Policy Reform in Latin America* (London, UK: Zed Books); Freedman, Des, 2008, *The Politics of Media Policy* (Malden, MA: Polity).
- <sup>55</sup> In an intervention in the Beirut consultation, journalist and consultant Kamel Labidi flagged the difficulties of building such networks of solidarity saying there have been many unsuccessful efforts to establish regional networks because of the complications related to the decision-making mechanisms and the lack of solidarity especially in support of journalists who are under attack.
- <sup>56</sup> A recent survey by Arab Barometer found that more than half of internet users consider social media a more trustworthy news source than TV and newspapers in the majority of countries surveyed. See Arab Barometer, June 24, 2019, "Findings Revealed from Big BBC News Arabic Survey," <https://www.arabbarometer.org/media-news/findings-revealed-from-the-big-bbc-news-arabic-survey/>.
- <sup>57</sup> For more on the dire situation in Egypt for civil society groups under the Sisi regime, see Human Rights Watch, "Egypt Crackdown on Democracy," <https://www.hrw.org/tag/egypt-crackdown-civil-society>.
- <sup>58</sup> See Al-Kaisy, Aida, 2019, *A Fragmented Landscape: Barriers to Independent Media in Iraq* (London, UK: Middle East Centre, The London School of Economics and Political Science); El-Issawi, Fatima, 2016, "Arab Transitional Media: A Comparative Analysis of Tunisian, Libyan and Egyptian Traditional Media Industries," in *Bullets and Bulletins: Media and Politics in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings*, Zayani, Mohamed and Mirghani, Suzi (New York, NY: Oxford University Press), 45-70; Ratta, Donatella Della, Sakr, Naomi, and Skovgaard-Petersen, Jakob, eds., 2015, *Arab Media Moguls* (London I.B.: Tauris).
- <sup>59</sup> For more, see this important report on how the Egyptian military is controlling the country's economy, Sayigh, Yezid, 2019, *Owners of the Republic: An Anatomy of Egypt's Military* (Beirut, Lebanon: Carnegie Middle East Center), <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/11/18/owners-of-republic-anatomy-of-egypt-s-military-economy-pub-80325>.
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- <sup>61</sup> Reporters Without Borders, Media Ownership Monitor, "Lebanon," <http://www.mom-rsf.org/en/countries/lebanon/>.
- <sup>62</sup> Reporters Without Borders, Media Ownership Monitor, "Morocco," <http://www.mom-rsf.org/en/countries/morocco/>.
- <sup>63</sup> Reporters Without Borders, Media Ownership Monitor, "Tunisia," <http://www.mom-rsf.org/en/countries/tunisia/>.
- <sup>64</sup> Fletcher, Richard, 2019, "Paying for News and the Limits of Subscription," Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/paying-for-news-and-the-limits-of-subscription/>.
- <sup>65</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, *Digital News Report 2019*, 10-11, <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org>.

- <sup>66</sup> Ibid., 9.
- <sup>67</sup> El-Issawi, Fatima, 2013, *Libya Media Transition: Heading to the Unknown* (London: POLIS, London School of Economics), [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/59906/1/El-Issawi\\_Libya-media-transition\\_2013\\_pub.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/59906/1/El-Issawi_Libya-media-transition_2013_pub.pdf).
- <sup>68</sup> Daraj presents itself in its website as “an independent digital media platform created by experienced journalists. Our goal is to offer Arabic speakers an alternative kind of journalism, free from political funding and influence, which controls other mainstream Arab media institutions.” See <https://daraj.com/>.
- <sup>69</sup> Enab Baladi, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/#ixzz66ryLcMj7>.
- <sup>70</sup> Article 19 MENA works on forming an alliance of actors in the aim to open channels of dialogues with the platforms within their work on self-regulation.
- <sup>71</sup> Inkyfada in Tunisia is following this model by providing training and by renting its premises for special events.
- <sup>72</sup> Media Landscapes, “Lebanon,” <https://medialandscapes.org/country/lebanon/policies/regulatory-authorities>.
- <sup>73</sup> The HACA was created in 2002 by a Dahir, and was amended in 2003, 2007, and 2008.
- <sup>74</sup> El-Issawi, Fatima, April 2016, *Moroccan National Media between Change and Status Quo* (London, UK: Middle East Center, London School of Economics), <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/66228/1/MoroccoReport.pdf>.
- <sup>75</sup> For analysis of the new council, see Article 19, March 18, 2019, “Egypt: 2018 Law on the Organisation of Press, Media and the Supreme Council of Media,” <https://www.article19.org/resources/egypt-2018-law-on-the-organisation-of-press-media-and-the-supreme-council-of-media/>.
- <sup>76</sup> The commission will be formed from a Council and an administrative body.
- <sup>77</sup> Ethical Journalist Network, July 3, 2019, “RSF and Partners Launch a Public Consultation on the Journalism Trust Initiative,” <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/rsf-public-consultation-journalism-trust-initiative>.
- <sup>78</sup> Reporters Without Borders, September 18, 2019, “RSF Now Offers an Interactive Feedback Tool as an Invitation to Participate in Its Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI),” <https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-now-offers-interactive-feedback-tool-invitation-participate-its-journalism-trust-initiative-iti>.
- <sup>79</sup> European Committee for Standardization, “Draft CWA by the CEN/WS—Journalism Trust Initiative Is Made Available for Public Review and Commenting,” <https://www.cen.eu/news/workshops/Pages/WS-2019-013.aspx>.
- <sup>80</sup> The alliance brings together groups such as *Internet Society*-chapitre, Article 19, *l’Institut de Presse et des Sciences de l’Information* (IPSI), I-Watch, Tech4Dev, and At Large Structures (ALS).
- <sup>81</sup> The participants stressed the need to clarify that what we mean by “reformers” in government is those committed to promoting democratic values in all fields.
- <sup>82</sup> Hodali, Diana, November 26, 2019, “Egypt’s Mada Masr: ‘We’re Not Going to Shut Up’ after Raids,” DW, <https://www.dw.com/en/egypts-mada-masr-were-not-going-to-shut-up-after-raids/a-51420912>.
- <sup>83</sup> For the UN statement on the arrest of journalist Hossam Bahgat from Mada Masr, see UN, Office of the Spokesperson for UN Secretary-General, “Highlights of the Noon Briefing by Farhan Haq, Deputy Spokesperson for Secretary-General António Guterres,” <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/noon-briefing-highlight?HighD=11/9/2015>. This statement was helpful in shedding light on the bleak situation of media rights and journalists’ protection in the country.
- <sup>84</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, July 11, 2019, “UNESCO Welcomes the Establishment of a Global Media Defense Fund, with Initial Funding by UK and Canada,” <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-welcomes-establishment-global-media-defense-fund-initial-funding-uk-and-canada>.



## Center for International Media Assistance

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY  
1025 F STREET, N.W., 8TH FLOOR  
WASHINGTON, DC 20004

PHONE: (202) 378-9700  
EMAIL: [CIMA@ned.org](mailto:CIMA@ned.org)  
URL: <https://cima.ned.org>



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for Democracy**  
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