Global Coalition of Civil Society and Media Organizations Stand in Solidarity with Independent Media Outlets in Lebanon Amid Targeting

Joint Statements · Lebanon · 6 April 2023

We the undersigned group of civil society and media organizations from around the world come together to stand in solidarity with two independent Lebanese media outlets as they come under state targeting for the critical reporting that they do.

On March 30, 2023, Jean Kassir, founder of online independent media platform Megaphone, was stopped while driving and informed by two State Security officers that he was being summoned for questioning at the General Directorate of State Security. Noting that State Security does not have the legal authority to investigate journalists, Kassir did not appear for his summons; instead, the outlet's lawyer appeared on his behalf. There she learned that the summons is in relation to a post produced by Megaphone titled "Lebanon Ruled by Fugitives from Justice," which highlights a number of Lebanese officials evading justice and prosecution for abuses they have committed. She also learned that the order to investigate Megaphone was issued by the Public Prosecutor at the Court of Cassation Ghassan Oueidat, who has recently been charged in the Beirut Port Explosion investigation and who has recently come under fire for obstructing the investigation. Kassir was summoned for a second time to appear before State Security on April 4, 2023; his lawyer once again appeared on his behalf, and iterated State Security's lack of authority in the case. Although no formal legal decision was relayed to the lawyer, shortly thereafter, Kassir received a call from the country's Information Minister stating that Oueidat had reportedly retracted his complaint.

In a separate set of circumstances, on March 31, 2023, Lara Bitar, founder of independent media organization The Public Source, was summoned to appear for interrogation on Thursday, April 6, by the Cybercrimes Bureau, acting on behalf of the Lebanese Forces (LF). The case is reportedly in relation to a piece previously published by the outlet in August 2022 which drew attention to environmental crimes committed by the LF during and after the Lebanese civil war.

The two cases, which were initiated by separate security agencies, represent an alarming escalation against independent reporting that seeks to hold public officials to account. They constitute violations of the right to freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Under Lebanon's constitution, "Freedom of…expression through speech and writing, the freedom of the press…are all guaranteed within the scope of the law." Lebanon's Press and Publications Law limits the prosecution of journalists to proceedings before the Court of Publications; members of the security sector do not have the legal authority to investigate journalists.

In recent years, journalists and bloggers critical of the state have increasingly been subject to

prosecution and charged with criminal defamation or false news. Journalists and social media users critiquing public figures and political parties online and via social media have also been increasingly called in for questioning by the Cybercrimes Bureau; they are rarely if ever informed of the reasons for the summons. These practices occur in violation of both Lebanese and international law.

We call on Lebanese authorities to halt the improper investigation and prosecution of independent media outlets and journalists for their coverage and reporting. These actions threaten to have a chilling effect on freedom of expression in the country.

Signatories

- Access Now
- Alternative Press Syndicate (Nakaba Badila)
- Arab Reform Initiative
- CIVICUS
- Committee for Justice
- Committee to Protect Journalists
- Daraj
- Digital Rights Lab – Sudan
- Freedom House
- HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement
- Impunity Watch
- Inkyfada – Al Khatt
- Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH)
- Lokman Slim Foundation
- MENA Prison Forum
- MENA Rights Group
- PEN America
- Raseef 22
- Samir Kassir Foundation
- Social Media Exchange (SMEX)
- The Policy Initiative
- The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP)
- The Tor Project
- UMAM Documentation & Research

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