Jordan | HuMENA Condemns the Targeting of Kamil Al-Zoubi for Peaceful Expression

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HuMENA condemns the continued targeting of Jordanian activist Kamil Al-Zoubi for the peaceful expression of political views on matters of public concern, through a sustained pattern of arrests, prosecutions, trials, and restrictive measures since 2014. This case reflects a cumulative approach that treats political criticism and digital expression as recurring grounds for criminalization, through broadly worded charges and parallel legal tracks, including publication-related cases, defamation-type prosecutions, and the application of the Cybercrimes Law. The result is a systematic increase in the cost of public participation and a chilling effect that extends beyond the individual to the wider civic space.[1]

This pattern began on 22 December 2014, when Kamil Al-Zoubi was arrested in Irbid and charged, among other accusations, with “insulting the state” and “undermining the regime.” He was released on bail in January 2015 and placed under a travel ban.[1] This early stage demonstrates that the intervention did not end with the initial arrest, but continued through a restrictive measure that limited freedom of movement and maintained pressure after release. In expression-related cases, prolonged restrictions can amount to a punitive effect in practice, as they place political participation under the ongoing threat of coercive measures.[2]

On 3 September 2018, Al-Zoubi was rearrested and detained for investigation on charges including “insulting the state,” “undermining the regime,” and “inciting sedition.”[1] The recurrence of arrest after several years, alongside similarly broad charges, reflects a logic of procedural attrition in expression-related cases, where repeated arrest, investigation, and litigation operate as deterrent tools in their own right, rather than a narrowly tailored intervention tied to a specific, demonstrable harm.[2]

On 11 May 2019, the case escalated when security forces raided Al-Zoubi’s home and arrested him along with his brother, with charges including “undermining the regime” and “altering the structure of the state.”[1] This shift toward heavier charges increases potential penalties and expands the procedural and practical risks associated with the case, turning published opinion into an entry point for more severe legal tracks. International human rights reporting at the time documented broader patterns of targeting political activists, placing this episode within a wider context of intervention against public actors.[3]

In 2020, Al-Zoubi launched a hunger strike in protest against his detention amid pressure and harsh detention conditions, before being released on a temporary basis while the cases remained unresolved.[1] This phase links the targeting of expression to detention standards and basic

safeguards, and illustrates how leaving cases open can sustain pressure through legal uncertainty and the ongoing possibility of renewed prosecution.[2]

During 2021–2022, the targeting expanded to include arrests and prosecutions linked to peaceful protests related to the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis, followed by renewed targeting over a tweet critical of the Prime Minister, and further prosecutions and detention over posts addressing political detainees and allegations of torture, alongside temporary restrictions on communication.[4] Across these developments, criminalization did not stop at political criticism, but extended to acts of solidarity and the circulation of information of public interest, undermining the public sphere's role in accountability and amplifying the chilling effect on reporting and discussion of violations.

Legislative risks increased following the entry into force of Cybercrimes Law No. 17 of 2023. International human rights actors have documented recurring concerns regarding broadly framed provisions, harsh penalties, and significant fines, as well as the potential use of such provisions against peaceful expression in ways that weaken legal clarity and foreseeability and increase the likelihood that critical posts will be reframed under expansive concepts.[5] This legislative context helps explain the escalation in punitive outcomes in later stages of Al-Zoubi's case, particularly where imprisonment and heavy financial penalties are prioritized over less restrictive measures in opinion-related matters.

Within this trajectory, the period 2024–2026 marks a turning point, as it involves more clearly documented sanctions, fines, and enforcement. On 31 October 2024, the Bani Kinana Magistrate Court issued a six-month prison sentence against Al-Zoubi on charges of "defaming an official body," while public reporting also referenced parallel allegations relating to "false news" that resulted in a finding of no criminal responsibility on that count.[6] This development moves the case from recurring procedural pressure into a custodial penalty tied to expression and content, widening the chilling effect on the broader civic space and entrenching imprisonment as a tool within publication- and defamation-type tracks when pursued through vague and disproportionate approaches.

On 25 June 2025, the Irbid Court of Appeal upheld the six-month prison sentence in the same case.[7] This confirms that the matter was not a transient first-instance procedure, but a completed litigation track that reached appellate review and resulted in an upheld custodial outcome. Appellate confirmation deepens the deterrent effect by signaling that imprisonment can be imposed and judicially sustained in expression-related cases, increasing the cost of public participation and reinforcing self-censorship.

On 1 January 2026, HuMENA monitored the renewed arrest of Al-Zoubi following a raid on his home in a track linked to the Cybercrimes Law.[8] At this stage, procedural safeguards are central, as the lawfulness of arrest must be assessed not only by eventual outcomes, but by the clarity of the legal basis for deprivation of liberty, the effective exercise of the right to defense, and the prevention of raids and arrests from functioning as social deterrence.

On 21 January 2026, the Amman Magistrate Court issued a two-year prison sentence against Al-Zoubi after convicting him of a misdemeanor for publishing information and writings on social media deemed to "undermine societal peace," pursuant to Article 17 of the Cybercrimes Law.[9] Public reporting on the judgment also indicates a related track involving "defamation of an official body."[10] The gravity of this outcome lies not only in the length of the sentence, but in the consolidation of expansive concepts as a pathway for penalizing opinion-based posts. Where critical expression is met with custodial punishment grounded in broad notions such as "societal peace," the test of necessity and proportionality becomes especially stringent, and the risk of expanding criminalization at the expense of protection for political expression increases, with consequences for the wider public sphere.[5]

HuMENA stresses that this pattern is inconsistent with Jordan's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, in particular Article 19 on freedom of expression, Article 9 on liberty and security of person, and Article 14 on fair trial guarantees.[2] Restrictions on expression are lawful only when grounded in clear and narrowly framed law, pursuing a legitimate aim, and meeting the tests of necessity and proportionality as the least restrictive means. In opinion-related cases, the use of imprisonment and high fines alongside recurring prosecutions deepens the chilling effect and undermines the public sphere's role in accountability and the circulation of information of public interest.[2]

HuMENA calls on the Jordanian authorities to:

- End prosecutions linked to peaceful expression in Kamil Al-Zoubi's case, and stop repeated arrests and the reopening of legal tracks based on social media posts and political positions.[1]
  • Secure his release and end the use of imprisonment in publication- and opinion-related cases, and adopt less restrictive measures consistent with the tests of necessity and proportionality under international law.[2]
  • Guarantee full procedural safeguards from the moment of arrest, including a clear legal basis for arrest, respect for the right to defense, and the cessation of any unjustified restrictions on communication, visits, or legal follow-up.[2]
  • Review vague legal provisions used to criminalize political criticism, including provisions of Cybercrimes Law No. 17 of 2023, to prevent their use against peaceful expression and ensure compliance with international standards.[5]

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