



Media Regulatory Reform in the Middle East and North Africa: The Regulation of the Profession of Journalists

Workshop Statement

We, expert participants from Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen, invited by the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, the Centre for Law and Democracy, International Media Support and Vigilance, at the Workshop on Media Regulatory Reform in the Middle East and North Africa: The Regulation of the Profession of Journalists, having assembled in Tunis, Tunisia, from 6-7 March 2015:

Noting that countries across the region have a number of similarities in terms of the legal environment for the regulation of the profession of journalists, alongside differences in terms of both the legal environment and the manner in which legal rules are applied;

Concerned that, despite law reforms in some countries in recent years, the legal framework for regulating journalists remains very problematical in many countries in the region and that systems which were designed to foster political control over the profession remain in place in most countries;

Stressing the importance of understanding the reasons why the sorts of restrictive regulatory rules governing journalists that are found in the Arab world were developed, as well as their roots in the regulation of the print media and the fact that very few countries around the world impose such rules;

Aware of the profound changes that have taken place in terms of media and journalism, and the rapid developments in terms of information and communications technologies in particular, and the need to fundamentally revise existing regulatory systems to take into account those working for the broadcast media and digital media;

Reiterating that the right to freedom of expression protects both the speaker and the receiver, and noting that the main mission of journalists and the media is to serve the information needs and interests of the public;

Highlighting the need to limit as far as possible opportunities for government control over the media and journalists which are provided for by current regulatory frameworks in most countries in the region;

Recognising that the rules in most countries pose obstacles for young people to engage in journalism, whereas what is needed is to encourage these young people to engage in expressive activities;

Welcoming the fact that most countries in the region are parties to the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and noting that others are bound by the guarantees for freedom of expression found in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*;

Adopt the following Statement on Media Regulatory Reform in the Middle East and North Africa: The Regulation of the Profession of Journalists, based on international standards which are binding on the governments of the region:

1. It is not for governments to decide who is and who is not a journalist.
2. The right to freedom of expression, as protected under international law and the constitutions of countries across the region, includes a right to engage in the profession of journalism and there should be no formal, legal restrictions on who may practise journalism. In this sense, journalism is different from other professions because the substance of what journalists do is a fundamental human right.
3. Journalists' syndicates and unions should not act as gatekeepers for the profession but, rather, should serve to protect and promote the rights of their members, and to advance freedom of expression and professional and ethical standards.
4. Journalists have the right to choose freely which associations, syndicates or unions they wish to belong to and neither the law nor employers should impose any mandatory or compulsory conditions on them to join any particular association, syndicate or union.
5. The provision of public funding and other benefits to journalists' associations, syndicates and/or unions, as well as to journalists and/or media outlets, poses a very serious risk of political interference; such funding and benefits should be provided only where this is done in a manner that is protected against interference and that is fair, transparent and ensures accountability.
6. Journalists have a right to protect the secrecy of their confidential sources of information and this right should be respected by police and other officials and may only be overridden where ordered by a court and as necessary to protect an overriding public interest.
7. Systems for issuing professional or press cards to journalists should not be used to control access to the profession, and should be overseen by bodies which are independent of government and be administered in a manner that is fair and transparent.
8. Systems for providing journalists with accreditation to special places or events (such as a parliamentary press corps) should be imposed only where required to ensure that journalists have access to limited space venues, and should be overseen by bodies which are independent of government and be administered in a manner that is fair and transparent.
9. More efforts need to be made by both the international community and local stakeholders to popularise relevant international standards relating to freedom of expression and freedom of association within the Arab World, and to raise awareness about the benefits which flow from respecting these rights in terms of governance, greater security, economic growth and sustainable development.