

Censorship in Arab countries

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On 2 June 2005, Samir Kassir, one of the most prominent journalists and democracy advocates in the Arab world, was killed by a bomb, as he started the engine of his old Alfa Romeo car parked near his home in Beirut, Lebanon. His killers brutally brought to a halt his much-awaited weekly column in the independent daily *An-nahar* on ways to democratise Lebanon and turn the page of dictatorship in neighbouring Syria and other autocratic Arab countries.

On the same day and thousands of miles away from Beirut, but still on the Mediterranean coast, the body of Dhaif Al-Ghazal, an outspoken Libyan journalist, was found totally disfigured in the suburbs of Benghazi, Libya's second largest city.

The murder of Kassir, who was widely known in the region and Western Europe because of his contribution for nearly 25 years to prestigious papers such as the Lebanese *An-nahar* and the French *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and his reputation for crossing "red lines", prompted widespread media coverage. His death also spurred an unprecedented wave of solidarity with his family, friends and colleagues and a call for an international investigation because of the deemed lack of independence of the Lebanese judicial system.

Unfortunately, the murder of the Libyan reporter prompted little media attention. It took nearly two weeks for the international community to learn about his kidnapping and assassination. Al-Ghazal was kidnapped by armed men on 21 May 2005; his body was only found on 2 June.

The case of Al-Ghazal gives an idea about the ongoing difficulty of monitoring and documenting human rights violations, including different forms of censorship in the Arab world. It was the little-known Libyan *Ar-rakeeb* (watchdog), a United Kingdom-based group of Libyan political and rights activists in exile, which issued the alert on the murder of Al-Ghazal. "Al-Ghazal was badly tortured, his fingers were cut and he was stabbed with a knife before he was shot dead," said the Libyan group. His critical online pieces on corruption within the ruling Revolutionary Committees

of which he was a former member seemed to have spurred the issuance of his death warrant.

Salem Mohamed, editor-in-chief of the online news site *Libya-alyoum.com* (Libya Today), said that for several months Al-Ghazal had been writing articles for his website critical of the Revolutionary Committees and Colonel Gaddafi's police state.

The murder of Kassir perpetrated in Lebanon, known for offering more room for free expression than most Arab countries, and of Al-Ghazal in Libya, where there is zero tolerance for independent reporting, represents the most brutal form of censorship. Scores of journalists and writers have been killed or disappeared over the past decades, particularly in Lebanon, Algeria and Iraq, for crossing "red lines" imposed by autocratic rulers, religious and political zealots and by also thugs inclined to take the law into their own hands, as corruption, injustice and oppression gain ground.

To date, no murderer of an Arab journalist has ever been brought to justice over the past decades. Nobody in the international human rights community, for instance, knows what happened to the Libyan journalist Abdullah Al-Sanussi Al-Dharrat, who has been detained without trial since 1973. The Libyan regime never acknowledged his arrest or detention, while his family and friends and press freedom defenders are still hoping that he is alive.

This article does not include remarks on censorship in Iraq, the deadliest country in the world for the press for decades. Up to early May 2007, at least 102 journalists and 39 media staffers were killed, according to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists. Moreover, monitoring attacks on freedom of expression has been increasingly difficult since the US-led invasion in March 2003.

The aim of the article is to highlight cases of censorship in some Arab countries, particularly Tunisia, which was often described in the West as a "beacon of hope" due to significant steps taken nearly 50 years ago towards education and justice for women. It is still unparalleled in the rest of the Arab region in this respect.

The main reason why this article sheds more light on censorship in Tunisia than any other Arab country is because it was paradoxically chosen by the United Nations, despite its poor freedom of expression record, to host the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in mid-November 2005.

One of the main objectives of the fact-finding missions to Tunisia undertaken by the IFEX Tunisia Monitoring Group (IFEX-TMG) before and after the second phase of the WSIS, was to keep the international community informed about various attacks on freedom of expression in one of the most skilled police states, as far as hiding its poor human records is concerned.

It takes more than brave volunteers lacking resources and often training and living under continuous surveillance and harassment to monitor and document widespread attacks on basic human rights, including freedom of expression, and to keep the international community informed. In the early 1990s, many of these volunteers were imprisoned or forced into exile after the huge crackdown on political dissent, independent journalism and the Tunisian League for Human Rights, the first of its kind in the Arab world. Established in 1977, this rights group, which has been monitoring and documenting attacks on freedom of expression, has been prevented since 2005 from convening its General Assembly and normally conducting its activities.

Although gross attacks on civil society advocates and independent journalists are on the rise, state repression in Tunisia and elsewhere in the region has so far failed to prevent the emergence of independent papers and new groups committed to human rights and freedom of expression.

Those living in the Middle East and North Africa, or who are monitoring from afar the status of freedom of expression in this part of the world, can easily notice that more and more people are taking their courage with both hands and expressing themselves on issues considered taboo until recently. They are also shedding more and more light on attacks on free expression and censorship. For instance, in early May 2005, four reports documenting cases of censorship and warning against its dangerous repercussions were made public in Tunisia.

Such a trend can be noticed, not only in a country like Lebanon, which – despite the murder of Samir Kassir and Gibran Tueni, editor of *Annahar*, and the maiming of Mai Chidiac, a talk show host of LBC TV, through car bombs in 2005 – for historic and social reasons has

offered more room for freedom of expression than in most Arab countries.

It can also be easily identified in Morocco, for instance, or in Egypt, where the circle of freedom of expression in the media and in the heavily guarded streets of Cairo has been widening rapidly over the past few years. Independent papers and rights groups focusing on the protection of journalists and freedom of expression have been mushrooming despite continual judicial and police attacks on independent and opposition papers.

Since 2004, Egypt has had one of the most independent dailies in the region called *Al-Masry Al-Youm* (The Egyptian Today). Many of its journalists and writers have taken to the streets over the past two years to call for the end of the state of emergency and of the grip of the Ministry of the Interior and President Hosni Mubarak's ruling National Democratic Party over the country's different aspects of life. Even in the state-owned media, Egyptian journalists and writers have never been so opposed to the humiliating fact that entrenched government employees, particularly at the Ministry of the Interior, have the final say in what people can read and watch and what "red lines" academics and students should not cross.

The harassment or detention of journalists or young Arab bloggers who have been playing a significant role in widening the circle of freedom of expression advocates and keeping people inside and outside the region informed about human rights violations, does not seem to prompt, as it used to do, self-censorship or paralyse the free flow of information.

Even in countries like Oman, Libya, Syria and Tunisia, where there is little tolerance for free expression, the number of people openly writing about the rampant corruption and the urgent need for genuine reform in their respective countries is increasing. The walls of censorship seem to be crumbling gradually everywhere in the region despite the rising attacks on freedom of expression, according to the annual reports of international press freedom groups, such as the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Without Borders, issued in 2007.

Although it is less used than in other parts of the world and websites are often blocked by autocratic Arab governments, the Internet has turned out to be a powerful tool of information about attacks on basic rights and censored books, papers and films, and also about ways to promote and implement genuine reform. According to the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (<http://www.hrinfo.net/en/>), there

are almost 40 000 Arabic blogs. Most of them were launched in 2006.

Unfortunately this peaceful quest for freedom has been met with violent reactions on the part of Arab autocratic governments that are apparently inclined to make concessions to Western governments in different economic and diplomatic fields, but not to abide by their commitment to international standards for freedom of expression and to respect their people's right to information.

The assassination of three journalists in Lebanon and Libya came as a new reminder that the price for free expression remains extremely high in all Arab countries. Unless the international community finds more effective ways to protect journalists and writers and to raise awareness about the dangerous consequences of censorship and lack of independent reporting, such a price will keep rising.

Ironically, the assassination of the Lebanese journalists prompted more self-censorship in neighbouring Syria than in Lebanon. Opinion page editors of leading papers, such as *An-nahar*, *As-Safir* and the *Daily Star* told the author of this article in July 2005 that the numbers of Syrian contributors to their respective opinion pages have decreased enormously since the murder of Samir Kassir on 2 June.

Despite the chilling effect of the assassination of Lebanese journalists on reporters and editors in both Lebanon and Syria, awareness among writers and journalists of the need to become involved in the struggle for freedom of expression seems to be on the rise. Scores of Arab groups dedicated to freedom of expression keep mushrooming and are getting together to raise awareness about the dangers of censorship. In Lebanon, the assassination of Kassir and Tueni and the assassination attempt on Chidiac led Kassir's relatives and friends to establish the Samir Kassir Foundation to promote independent journalism (<http://www.samirkassir.net/>). The attacks also led to the emergence of the Skills Foundation (<http://www.maharatfoundation.org/>) committed to monitoring attacks on freedom of expression and campaigning against impunity in the cases of the assassination of journalists.

Many groups have been joining international and regional networks involved in promoting and protecting freedom of expression. In early 2006, the Arab Archives Institute (Jordan), the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (<http://www.hrinfo.net>) in Egypt and the Observatory for the Freedom of the Press, Publishing and Creation (<http://www.observatoire-olpec.org/index.htm>, Tunisia) joined IFEX, bringing the number of Arab groups under the umbrella of this international freedom of expression network to six out of a total of 71 members. The other three are: the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (<http://www.eohr.org>), the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (<http://www.cihrs.org>) and the Algerian Centre for the Defence of Press Freedom.s

In June 2006, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information and the Observatory for the Freedom of the Press, Publishing and Creation established in cooperation with other groups from Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania and Tunisia, the Working Group on Press Freedom and Free Expression in North Africa (<http://wgfena.org/en/>).

The mysterious disappearance on 11 August 2003 of Egyptian journalist Reda Helal of *Al-Ahram*, the kidnapping of Abdel Halim Kandil of the Egyptian weekly *Al Arabi* in 2004, and the sexual assault in May 2005 on female journalists in the streets of Cairo by thugs close to the ruling party did not prevent the increasing number of Egyptian journalists and writers from taking to the streets to protest against attacks on freedom of expression and to keep crossing red lines.

Monitoring such attacks and exerting pressure on Arab governments to bring to justice those who killed Kassir, Tueni and Al-Ghazal and maimed Chidiac in 2005, and to release imprisoned journalists, writers and democracy advocates, would be extremely helpful to end censorship and autocratic rule in the Arab world.

The release in August 2005 of three prominent Saudi dissidents and their lawyer was good news for many. The poet Ali Domani arbitrarily condemned to nine years in prison for calling for a constitutional monarchy was among them. After the new king of Saudi Arabia decided to pardon them, one now wonders whether freedom of expression advocates will have to wait until a new king ascends the throne or a dictator is overthrown to hear that some writers or journalists are no longer behind bars.

As Arab states keep tightening the screw on free expression and silencing prominent writers and democracy activists, poorly documented books and publications on religion and myths are mushrooming in the streets of Arab cities and on the shelves of their libraries. Salama Ahmed Salama of the state-run daily *Al-Ahram*, and one of the most respected journalists in Egypt, said in his column on 14 June 2005 that although he opposed all forms of censorship on books and publications, he finds "all this huge flow of poison attributed to culture and religion extremely excessive".

Many like Salama, including the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (EOHR), which has been playing a major role in monitoring and documenting attacks on free expression since its establishment in the mid-1980s, find it unacceptable that those in charge of the Islamic university of Al-Azhar are involving themselves in politically motivated Fatwas, or religious edicts, while turning a blind eye to “poisonous writings in the name of Islam”.

In 2004, EOHR issued a report on attacks on freedom of expression perpetrated in the name of Islam between 1920 and 1990, and underscored the need for a campaign to defend “freedom of expression and thought and creativity, which should not be subject to any form of censorship by religious institutions”. This report came in reaction to an Egyptian ministerial decree granting the Al-Azhar Islamic Research Council (IRC) the power to monitor copies of the Quran that have not “received the agreement or permission of Al-Azhar” and to instigate legal action against their distributors. It also gives the IRC the right to take action against publishers of books they deem to be “offending Islam”.

Many lawyers and writers maintain that there is no legal ground for Al-Azhar’s censorship on artistic and literary works. But this did not prevent the institution from calling for a ban on some Nawal Saadawi’s books, including her novel, *Fall of the imam*, published more than 20 years ago and translated into 14 languages. Al-Azhar also recommended the ban of another book titled *Responsibility for the failure of the modern Islamic state in the modern age* by Gamal Al-Banna, the younger brother of the founder of the influential Muslim Brotherhood Movement in 1928.

A comprehensive study on censorship in Egypt was made public nearly three years ago by a group of Egyptian researchers led by Negad Al-Boraie of the Committee for the Development of Democracy. The study severely criticises what Al-Boraie calls the role of Al-Azhar in “hampering cultural input in Egypt and restricting freedom of expression”. The Coptic Church is also criticised for using its influence to restrict freedom of expression.

Religious authorities in Tunisia have no real say on censorship issues. Unlike Egypt, Tunisia has seen freedom of expression lose ground since President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali seized power in a bloodless coup in 1987. Journalists and writers were less harassed under President Ben Ali’s predecessor, Habib Bourguiba, even if the latter ran the country with a firm hand for 31 years.

The decision taken by a group of members of IFEX in 2004 to monitor the status of freedom of expression in Tunisia before and after the second phase of the WSIS held in Tunis on 16-18 November, helped pave the way for unprecedented fact-finding missions dealing with free expression in the region.

The 16-member group, known as the Tunisian Monitoring Group (TMG), undertook five fact-finding missions to Tunisia since January 2005 to shed light on attacks on freedom of expression perpetrated by a regime that relies on well-trained bureaucrats at home and skilled lobbyists in Western capitals to hide its human rights violations and get away with them.

The latest mission took place at the end of February 2007. It was set up to coincide with the second anniversary of the imprisonment on 1 March 2005 of Mohamed Abbou, a human rights lawyer and writer, for submitting pieces critical of President Zine El Abidine’s despotic rule to a Tunisian blocked news website, Tunisnews (<http://www.tunisnews.net/>). The fourth IFEX-TMG report (http://campaigns.ifex.org/tmg/IFEXTMGreport_April2007.doc) issued in April 2007 confirmed that the situation regarding freedom of expression had not stopped declining:

“Since WSIS, and since the last TMG report issued in May 2006, we have disappointingly witnessed serious deterioration in the conditions related to freedom of expression in Tunisia, particularly with respect to independent organisations, harassment of journalists and dissidents, independence of the judiciary, blocking of books and websites, and the imprisonment of the human rights lawyer Mohamed Abbou, for voicing his opinion in articles on the Internet. Cumulatively these changes lead us to conclude that the Tunisian government has sought to further stifle dissent since May 2006.”

In January 2007, IFEX-TMG urged new UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon to remind Tunisia of its obligations under international law to respect freedom of expression and other obligations. “The blatant conflict between the United Nations’ values and principles on the one hand and Tunisia’s record of freedom of expression and media freedom on the other hand cannot be ignored any longer, particularly after taking the responsibility to hold the WSIS in Tunis and the election of Tunisia to the UN Human Rights Council in May 2006,” TMG said in its letter to the UN Secretary-General (http://campaigns.ifex.org/tmg/TMG_LettertoBankiMoon_Jan2006.doc). President Bush’s war on terror has obviously helped President Ben Ali and his autocratic counterparts in different

parts of the world to wage more attacks on free expression.

The findings of IFEX-TMG (<http://campaigns.ifex.org/tmg/>), which the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and IFLA/FAIFE joined in 2005, seem to have spurred the Tunisian government to undertake some minor cosmetic changes. For instance, a second private radio station, Radio Jawhara, has been established in 2005, but its founders are close to the President Ben Ali's ruling party, just like the founders of Radio Mosaïque established in 2003.

Furthermore, the law no longer requires submission of copies of newspapers to the authorities, including the Ministry of the Interior, before distribution. This legal submission is, however, still enforced as far as books and their distribution are concerned. The list of websites blocked by the Tunisian authorities for political reasons has slightly diminished.

The findings of the IFEX-TMG mission are posted on different websites, including that of IFEX, the Index on Censorship, the World Association of Newspapers, Hinfo and the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights. Among the findings was a list of banned books, many of which were written by prominent intellectuals, such as Mohamed Talbi and Moncef Marzouki, or edited by rights groups, like the Tunisian Association for Democratic Women (ATFD) or the Arab Institute for Human Rights (AIHR). Some of the banned books deal with human rights education and women's rights. Others tackle historic issues and aim to help Tunisians understand their recent history. Another book contains the papers of a conference held in Tunis in 2000 on censorship in the Arab world. Although not comprehensive, the list of banned books is the longest in Tunisia's recent history.

Unfortunately, the Tunisian government continues to deny any censorship of books or the Internet, or any

imprisonment of Tunisians for expressing themselves. High-ranking officials keep claiming that freedom of expression is prospering and that there are no political prisoners or prisoners of conscience in the country. Yet local and international human rights groups have been documenting hundreds of prisoners who have been detained for peacefully exercising their right to free expression and association.

The coalition of national and international NGOs forming IFEX-TMG has spurred much hope among independent writers and journalists. It has encouraged the beleaguered rights groups to make greater effort to inform the international community about the legitimate and peaceful struggle for freedom in Tunisia. The IFEX-TMG missions are having a galvanising effect on people suffering from censorship and fearing its negative impact on the future of their children. They are also exercising pressure on the Tunisian government.

At a time when the recommendations of IFEX-TMG seem to fall on deaf ears in Tunis and in Western capitals that are on friendly terms with President Ben Ali's police state, IFEX-TMG needs to seek ways to raise awareness in Western countries about the dangers of turning a blind eye to continued attacks on human rights and rising attempts to silence independent journalists, academics and human rights defenders.

Fact-finding missions involving representatives of different NGOs can help improve the situation regarding freedom of expression in Tunisia and elsewhere in the region. So too can the backing of beleaguered NGOs lacking resources and training, as well as international attention to monitor and document attacks on free expression and to keep the international community aware of the dangerous consequences of continuing to impose censorship in the Arab world.