



لجنة دعم الصحفيين

Journalist Support Committee

Qatar

Report of the Journalist Support Committee submitted to the Universal Periodic Review of the United Nations 47th Session of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review November 4-16, 2024

The Journalist Support Committee (JSC) is a non-profit organization registered in London in 2018 (registration number 11472736). The committee represents journalists, writers, broadcasters, correspondents, editors, photographers, and online journalists from all Arab countries. Its primary mission is to promote media freedom, freedom of expression, and freedom of opinion under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), defend press freedom, radio, television, social media, and promote journalist safety, and take a stand against all forms of violence against journalists.

The values of the Journalist Support Committee (JSC) lie in establishing and maintaining a high level of ethical and professional standards in the media industry, promoting the education, skills, and proficiency of individuals involved in all forms of journalistic work across all media levels and platforms.

Overview of the Third Universal Periodic Review:

During the Third Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2019, Qatar received 270 recommendations, of which only 178 were accepted. Regarding press freedom and freedom of expression, Qatar received 18 recommendations, with 8 recommendations accepted and 10 noted.

Despite Qatar's endorsement of the following recommendations:

- Adopt a law on freedom of information in accordance with international standards on public access to information and individual liberties
- Remove all obstacles to freedom of expression and association, including for human rights defenders, and ensure the safety of journalists through the protection of media freedoms



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- Adopt necessary measures to bring its domestic legislation on freedom of expression, opinion and association into line with international standards and to investigate and sanction harassment and acts of violence against human rights defenders and journalists
- Encourage freedom of expression by protecting the rights of human rights defenders
- Increase protection of freedom of expression, particularly in the media, through swift, effective implementation of the recent media law
- Respect the right to freedom of opinion and expression and refrain from imposing any undue restriction on this right, including with regard to the new draft media law
- Take measures to remove existing restrictions on the free exercise of freedom of religion and belief of its citizens
- Strengthen the human rights perspective in the fight against terrorism, guaranteeing freedom of expression and the right to a fair trial

Qatari media, despite its development, still falls short of the legal standard required by international law, and legal repression persists.

General Context:

Media in Qatar is diverse, encompassing television, radio, cinema, newspapers, magazines, and the internet. Al Jazeera English is a pioneering media outlet. Despite Al Jazeera being one of the most open media outlets in the Middle East and North Africa region, Qatari authorities have imposed restrictions on local media freedom, including internet censorship and criminalization of criticizing the ruling family in the media.

In terms of print journalism, there are seven newspapers in circulation in Qatar; four in Arabic and three in English. Prominent among these newspapers are "Al-Watan" and "The Peninsula" and "Gulf Times"¹.

Traditional journalism in Qatar is characterized by a clear harmony in its coverage of events, with largely similar headlines dominating the pages of local newspapers, praising everything undertaken by the Prince and those close to him. Despite the global fame of Al Jazeera, signs of media diversity are emerging through community media outlets run by migrants speaking different languages, notably the "Doha News" website².

Editorial lines of media outlets are closely linked to the prevailing political context. Amidst the Arab Spring revolutions, their coverage of popular protests aligned perfectly with Qatar's official stance. Undoubtedly, the handling of news content was influenced during the blockade imposed by Gulf neighboring countries on Qatar in 2017, taking a different path with the

¹ https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85_%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B1

² <https://rsf.org/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AF/%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B1>



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resumption of diplomatic relations between the concerned states³.

All journalists in Qatar exercise a degree of self-censorship and face potential imprisonment on charges of defamation and other press crimes. While Qatar has seen notable progress according to the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, ranking 105 out of 180 in 2023 after being ranked 119 in 2022.

Journalists in Qatar faced numerous challenges during their coverage of the FIFA World Cup events. Reporters Without Borders and two journalists' unions issued statements demanding Qatari authorities provide a work environment that respects press freedom, highlighting increasing cases of harassment and obstruction faced by journalists. The statement pointed to reports of arrests and violence against sports journalists. Meanwhile, the "Sunday Times" newspaper reported the involvement of cyber pirates hired to defend Qatar's reputation in targeting journalists. Despite Qatar's government's denial of involvement in the piracy campaign, these events sparked controversy over Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup and respect for human rights and press freedom⁴.

Constitutional and Legislative Framework:

- Article 47 of the Qatari Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and opinion within the limits of laws and regulations. Article 48 ensures freedom of the press, printing, and publishing according to the law⁵.
- The Press and Publication Law (1979) regulates all matters related to the press, prohibiting criticism of the Emir of Qatar without explicit permission and imposing penalties of up to six months' imprisonment. Journalists are prohibited from publishing material that harms national interests, violates public morals, or disrupts the country's economic situation.⁶
- Defamation is a criminal offense according to the Qatari Penal Code (2004), with Article 326 prescribing imprisonment or fines for offenders⁷.
- Government entities, radio, and television in Qatar have the authority to regulate local and foreign media content on religious, political, or sexual grounds before distribution.

³ Ibid

⁴ <https://www.dw.com/ar/%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%88-%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B1-%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%84/a-63825775>

⁵ https://encyclop.sjc.gov.qa/lawlib/Images/court_admin/laws/constitution/index1_2wh.htm

⁶ <https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/ar/text/236836>

⁷ <http://www.undp-aciac.org/publications/ac/compendium/qatar/criminalization-lawenforcement/criminal-04-ar.pdf>



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- Broadcasting and the internet are regulated by the Communications Regulatory Authority, established in 2014, overseeing the telecommunications, information technology, postal services, and access to digital media sectors.
- All publications require government licensing and compliance with regulatory requirements. The Ministry of Culture and Sports issues licenses to companies in the press and publishing sector, according to Decree No. 16 of 1993.
- In January 2020, Qatar issued a new law significantly restricting freedom of expression. This vaguely worded law criminalizes a wide range of expression and publishing activities.
- The law issued by Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani added a provision (Article 136 bis) to the Penal Code. It punishes with imprisonment anyone who broadcasts, publishes, or redistributes rumors, statements, or false or biased news with the intent to harm national interests, stir public opinion, or undermine the social or public system of the state. Under this law, broadcasting or publishing "biased" content can lead to imprisonment for up to five years and a fine of 100,000 Qatari Riyals (over \$25,000)⁸.
- Qatar joined the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 2018. Article 19 of the Covenant guarantees the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas.
- Qatar already has several repressive laws restricting freedom of expression such as the Press and Publication Law (issued in 1979) and the Cybercrime Law (issued in 2014), which limit the space for open discourse and opposition⁹.

Impact of Laws on Journalists and Media in Qatar:

- **Self-censorship and Fear:**

- Journalists and media professionals are forced to practice self-censorship due to the vague formulation of laws.
- Fear of legal prosecution leads to withholding vital information or avoiding sensitive topics.
- Journalistic activity witnessed a contraction in terms of investigative reporting and coverage related to governmental affairs and local issues.

- **Legal Threats:**

- Journalists who publish content deemed "biased" or harmful to national interests risk imprisonment.
- Media outlets face legal penalties if they publish information deemed harmful to the state by the regime.
- Concerns about legal consequences may lead journalists to avoid reporting on corruption, human rights violations, or dissenting opinions.

⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/qatar-repressive-new-law-further-curbs-freedom-of-expression/>

⁹ Ibid



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- **Challenges Across the Internet and Self-Censorship:**
 - Restrictive laws lead to the spread of self-censorship among social media users.
 - Individuals hesitate to express their opinions or discuss sensitive topics for fear of legal repercussions.
 - Critical reports or investigative journalism on social media platforms may be reduced.
 - Government surveillance of online activities leads to restricted free discussions and activity.

Recommendations:

- Review laws that restrict freedom of expression and press in Qatar and ensure their compliance with international human rights standards.
- Remove provisions in the Cybercrime Law and Penal Code that criminalize peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression.
- Enhance transparency of laws and legal procedures and promote journalists' right to access information.
- Encourage open dialogue and cooperation between the government and media to ensure a balance between national interests and freedom of expression.
- Raise awareness in society about the importance of freedom of expression and press in building an open and democratic society.
- Strike a balance between individual rights and national interests in legislation related to freedom of expression and press.
- Ensure transparency and accountability regarding the enforcement of laws related to freedom of expression and press.
- Balance national security with the protection of journalists' rights and freedom of the press.
- Take immediate measures to curb hate speech and incitement in national media.
- Take immediate measures to ensure that the Cybercrime Law and Penal Code do not restrict the constitutional right to freedom of expression.



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