

Lebanon

	2014	2015		
Internet Freedom Status	Partly Free	Partly Free	Population:	5 million
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	14	13	Internet Penetration 2014:	75 percent
Limits on Content (0-35)	12	12	Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:	No
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	21	20	Political/Social Content Blocked:	Yes
TOTAL* (0-100)	47	45	Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:	Yes
			Press Freedom 2015 Status:	Partly Free

* 0=most free, 100=least free

Key Developments: June 2014 – May 2015

- Dozens of websites remained blocked over the past year, mainly for content related to escort services, Israel, gambling, or alleged child pornography (see **Blocking and Filtering**).
- The Ministry of Telecommunications increased internet bandwidth and decreased prices for Lebanese users, although internet speeds remain low compared to neighboring countries (see **Availability and Ease of Access**).
- The Cybercrimes Bureau continued to harass activists and journalists for their social media activity. In one case, security forces misled Karim Hawwa into entering the bureau and subsequently detained him for four days for sharing a political article (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities**).
- Several news agencies and government municipalities had their websites hacked, with assailants threatening to delete historical archives (see **Technical Attacks**).

Introduction

Conditions for internet freedom in Lebanon remained somewhat static over the past year, with minor improvements in infrastructure and a decrease in violence against internet users. Disagreements among Lebanon's political and sectarian groups about the handling of the Syrian crisis have led to an increase in hate speech on social media. Overall, the country witnessed a significant drop in violence compared to last year, although political uncertainty and economic stagnation continued. A new Council of Ministers was formed in February 2014 after 10 months without a government, and the end of Michel Sleiman's presidential term in May resulted in another protracted power vacuum. That November, parliament voted to extend its own term until 2017, justifying the move on security concerns related to the conflict in neighboring Syria.¹ The decision marks the second time parliament has delayed new elections, which were originally due in June 2013. Nongovernmental organizations led protests against the decision in front of the parliament building in Beirut.²

Lebanese activists continued to effectively employ social media for advancing causes on digital rights, as well as for dealing with political, social, and humanitarian issues related to the plight of Syrian refugees. However, activists and journalists face potential arrest, interrogation, and threats of bodily harm for online posts critical of public officials or the army. The Bureau of Cybercrime and Intellectual Property Rights (Cybercrime Bureau), in particular, remains highly active in targeting activists, often in a manner that demonstrates little respect for the rule of law. In November 2014, Karim Hawwa reported to the bureau after he had been told he purchased a stolen smartphone, but he was instead detained for four days for sharing of a news article on his Facebook page that accused the interior minister of wrongdoing.

Lebanese citizens have historically boasted a strong tradition of freedom of the press and media pluralism. With respect to information and communication technologies (ICTs), however, the country has struggled to keep up with its more technologically advanced neighbors in the Arab world. A lack of competition in the ICT market has plagued innovation and development, although improvements to bandwidth and lower prices were seen over the coverage period. While online censorship is rare, websites owners, particularly news sites, often receive requests from courts to remove content that may be seen as defamatory. In total, 50 websites were blocked over the coverage period, mainly for content related to escort services, Israel, gambling, or alleged child pornography. Surveillance remains a strong concern in the country, particularly given the impunity of the security forces.

Obstacles to Access

Lebanon continues to struggle with poor telecommunications infrastructure, slow speeds, an urban-rural divide, and a lack of competition in the ICT sector. The state company Ogero maintains a monopoly over internet services in the country, while two state-owned mobile phone companies essentially split the mobile market between themselves. The country's ICT development has been consistently stalled by mismanagement and political tensions, although there were some signs of improvement over the past year.

1 "Lebanon profile – Timeline," BBC News, April 29, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14649284>.

2 "Lebanon Parliament Extends Term," NOW, November 5, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1xc8EeT>.

Availability and Ease of Access

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), internet penetration in Lebanon was recorded at 75 percent at the end of 2014, up from 30 percent five years earlier.³ Lebanon ranked 6th in the Arab world and 62nd globally in the ITU's ICT Development Index (IDI).⁴ However, internet speeds are relatively slow in the country.⁵ One of the main reasons for slow internet is Lebanon's old infrastructure. Although the country commissioned a new fiber-optic network in 2011 at a cost of \$55 million, reports indicate the network may not yet be in use, apparently due to a lack of bureaucratic approvals by the new administration under Telecommunications Minister Boutros Harb. The ministry stated that contractors made several errors in laying down the 4,000 kilometers of fiber-optic cables, which it has set out to fix.⁶

Prices for internet access are set by the government. A decree by the Ministry of Telecommunications lowered fees on broadband by 44 to 68 percent as of July 2014, depending on bandwidth rates.⁷ That same month, mobile phone providers expanded the capacity of broadband bundles between 55 percent and 300 percent without changing the initial prices. Therefore, the 500 megabyte bundle was offered for a fixed price of \$10, excluding TVA for both fixed and prepaid mobile users.⁸ ISPs cannot lower prices unless a decree is issued by the Ministry of Telecommunications.⁹ Tariff decree number 6297, adopted on November 9, 2011, allowed for 20 percent discounts on DSL prices in educational institutions, and decree number 8058, issued on April 25, 2012, made internet free between midnight and 7a.m. and all day in public parks.¹⁰

The Ministry of Telecommunications reported that 400 new 3G antennas were installed in December 2013, and an additional 900 antennas, more frequency, and a third channel are in progress as part of a plan to increase 3G coverage.¹¹ Despite the ministry's slow response to much-needed repairs and upgrades outside of major urban areas, some progress has been achieved in the past year. For instance, in an attempt to curb the internet penetration disparity between urban and rural areas, a recent initiative called "the Dari bundle" allows some 200,000 citizens living in 210 remote towns with no access to DSL to get free phone sets and monthly mobile internet pricing equal to the fixed DSL price.¹² Nevertheless, some 300 villages in the rural regions of Keserwan, Batroun, Nabatiyeh, and Bekaa still lacked access, mainly due to a lack of a fixed telephone network in the area.¹³ Many in Lebanon, particularly in rural areas, experienced constant cuts to telecommunications services due to harsh weather conditions and energy cuts.

3 International Telecommunication Union, "Percentage of individuals using the internet," 2015, <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

4 International Telecommunication Union, *Measuring the Information Society Report 2014*, <http://bit.ly/1NUbnkf>.

5 Ookla, "Ookla Net Index", April, 10, 2015, <http://www.netindex.com/download/2,104/Lebanon/>

6 Livia Murray, "Four reasons Lebanon's internet is so slow," *Executive Magazine*, April, 8, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1aufiXc>.

7 Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, *Annual Report 2014*, [in Arabic] <http://www.tra.gov.lb/Annual-reports>.

8 Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, *Annual Report 2014*, [in Arabic] <http://www.tra.gov.lb/Annual-reports>.

9 Livia Murray, "Four reasons Lebanon's internet is so slow," *Executive Magazine*, April, 8, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1aufiXc>.

10 Ministry of Telecommunications, *Progress Report 2013*, http://www.mpt.gov.lb/documents/AnnualReports/MOT_brochure_en-corr.pdf

11 Ministry of Telecommunications, *Progress Report 2013*, http://www.mpt.gov.lb/documents/AnnualReports/MOT_brochure_en-corr.pdf.

12 Caretaker Telecoms Minister Nicolas Sehnaoui, Facebook page, January 20, 2014, <http://on.fb.me/1bEu47U>.

13 «رغاً راعشاً كتح تنرتن إلا نم قمورحم تكين انبل لال قطانم لاء» [These Lebanese Regions have no access to internet till Further Notice], *Annahar*, April, 9, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1UC501o>.

Restrictions on Connectivity

The Lebanese government maintains a monopoly over the internet backbone, as well as over the fixed and mobile telephone industry in general, allowing it to exercise tight control over internet service providers (ISPs). Lebanon has three international border gateways—in Beirut, Jdeideh, and Tripoli—where three underwater fiber-optic cables connect the country via the IMEWE, Cadmos, and Berytar cables.¹⁴ The gateways are operated by Ogero, a state company headed by Abdulmenaim Youssef who, in an apparent conflict of interest, also occupies a position within the Ministry of Telecommunications that oversees the operations of Ogero.

ICT Market

The Lebanese telecommunications industry is government-owned and tightly regulated. In addition to running the backbone, Ogero sets internet prices and shares in the management of online subscriptions, together with two dozen private ISPs.¹⁵ Lebanon has two government-owned mobile phone companies, Alfa and Touch, which are run by the private companies Orascom Telecom Holdings and Zain, respectively.¹⁶ Because the government sets prices and issues permits for the number of subscriptions allowed, there is little competition in the industry, and the two companies split the market evenly between themselves.¹⁷ The fixed-line telephone and internet network is owned and operated by Ogero, from whom all companies must purchase services.

Since no law regulates their licensing, private ISPs currently obtain a permit by decree from the Ministry of Telecommunications.¹⁸ Crucially, political influence can significantly interfere with the allocation of contracts to private ISPs and mobile phone operators.¹⁹

Regulatory Bodies

Lebanese media and telecommunications laws are regulated by three semi-independent advisory bodies that report to the Council of Ministers. The National Council for Audiovisual Media and the Committee for Establishing Model Bylaws and Practices deal mainly with audiovisual media (TV, radio, and satellite), while the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) is responsible for liberalizing, regulating, and developing the telecommunications sector. Overall, the three bodies remain largely powerless and fail to live up to their expectations as independent regulators in a modern state. While in theory the TRA is independent from the government, in reality, dominant Lebanese political groups possess a great deal of influence over the institution, often rendering it powerless.²⁰ For this reason, the Ministry of Telecommunications remains the strongest player in the ICT domain. In fact, the past three telecommunications ministers have gone so far as to claim that the TRA has

14 Livia Murray, "Four reasons Lebanon's internet is so slow," *Executive Magazine*, April, 8, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1aufiXc>.

15 Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, "Facts and Figures," December 2011, <http://www.tra.gov.lb/Market-Data-Facts-and-figures>.

16 Touch, "About Us," <http://bit.ly/1MhupRM>; Alfa, "About Alfa," <https://www.alfa.com.lb/aboutus/companyinfo.aspx>.

17 "The Next Step," *The Business Year*, <http://www.thebusinessyear.com/publication/article/2/48/lebanon-2012/the-next-step>.

18 According to the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), it is TRA's prerogative to assess and grant license to ISPs, but the past three ministers of telecommunication have considered that the TRA has no legal authority to do so, and the ministry has used an old law as a basis for their right to grant such license. See below for conflicts between the TRA and the Telecommunications Ministry.

19 Jad Melki, et. al., *Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon*, Open Society Foundations, May 2012, 89, <http://osf.to/1EOX3Kt>.

20 Jad Melki, et. al., *Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon*, Open Society Foundations, May 2012, 34 and 82.

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no real authority, given that the law establishing its powers has not yet been implemented.²¹ Tellingly, since its launch in 2007, many of the TRA's objectives have not been met, namely the transition from analog to digital networks and the privatization of the telecommunications sector. Yasser Fneish, senior interconnection expert at TRA, noted that the committee is finalizing a request for proposals (RFP) to purchase the adequate equipment for the digital broadcasting network.²² Similarly, the Lebanese National Committee for Transition to Digital TV has announced its work plan and launched operations to complete the transition by June 17, 2015. However, many of these issues will likely be held up by political disputes and more pressing security issues.

Limits on Content

Lebanon does not engage in significant filtering of internet content. Some 50 websites were blocked over the coverage period, mainly for content related to escort services, Israel, gambling, and alleged child pornography. Websites owners, particularly news sites, often receive requests from courts to remove content that may be seen as defamatory. Despite these limitations, Lebanon retains one of the most diverse digital landscapes in the Arab world, and several nongovernmental organizations engage in digital activism on political and social issues.

Blocking and Filtering

From 2013-14 to 2014-15, the number of websites blocked by the Lebanese government dropped from 64 to 50.²³ Among the remaining websites blocked were:

- 23 websites related to escort services, blocked in accordance with articles 523 and 524 of the penal code;
- 11 Israeli sites, blocked in accordance with decree number 12562 issued April, 19, 1963 which called for the boycotting of Israel;
- 8 gambling websites, blocked according to Law 417 of 1995, which gives the "Casino Du Liban" exclusive rights to investing in gambling;
- 5 pornographic websites which allegedly promoted child pornography;
- 2 websites for breaching copyright, following a request from the U.S. government;
- 1 website, identified as being a forum for Lesbians in the Arab region, was blocked. Article 534 of the penal code criminalizes "sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature" with up to one year in prison and has been used to prosecute LGBT individuals.²⁴

While many of these blocking orders have legal rooting, the order to block six pornographic websites for alleged child pornography drew the ire of some digital rights activists in the way that they

21 Sami Halabi, "Redialing discord?" *Executive Magazine*, July 3, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1JUw5xC>.

22 Yasser Fneish, senior interconnection expert at the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, February 7, 2014, Beirut, email interview.

23 Social Media Exchange, "Mapping Blocked Websites in Lebanon 2015," March, 26, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1NiBh2Z>.

24 Sophie Chamas, "The fight goes on for Lebanon's LGBT community," *Al Monitor*, June 15, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/lebanon-lgbt-gay-rights-article-534-helem-legal-agenda.html>.

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were chosen.²⁵ The order to block the sites came after an alleged child molester in Lebanon was reported to the Bureau of Cybercrimes from a police station in Manchester, UK, which stated that the owner of the IP address in Lebanon was molesting a child in Manchester by sending her pictures of a sexual nature. Sources from the Bureau of Cybercrimes who were present during the interrogation of the accused individual revealed that the websites were chosen to be blocked because they appeared in the browser history of his personal laptop, rather than due to their publication of child pornography.²⁶ A prominent Lebanese blogger and social media expert wrote that the websites were among the most famous pornographic websites worldwide and were unlikely to feature child pornography, given that they are not censored in other countries that ban child pornography.²⁷

In order to block a website in Lebanon, a court order must be issued. Commonly, the court receives a complaint and files it with the Cybercrimes Bureau for further investigation, later issuing a final order to the Ministry of Telecommunications which blocks the websites through Ogero. Website owners are not notified that their websites are being blocked and must appeal the blocking within 48 hours in order to have it overturned.

YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and international blog-hosting services such as Wordpress and Blogger are freely available. In fact, Facebook, Google, YouTube, Microsoft's Live.com, Twitter, and Wikipedia rank among the top 10 most visited websites in Lebanon.²⁸ While most social media and communication apps are available in Lebanon, certain Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) applications are blocked on an inconsistent basis in line with the 2002 Telecom Act.²⁹ VoIP services are mainly blocked because they cut into government revenues generated by international phone calls. In 2010, the government-owned phone company Ogero installed equipment to block VoIP throughout the network, but subsequently backed down under pressure from businesses, civil society, and politicians. Furthermore, only certain VoIP services are blocked, such as Vonage, while Skype is freely accessible.³⁰ No clear government decision on the matter exists and the law banning VoIP remains in place, though its implementation remains vague and inconsistent. Recently, the telecoms ministry noted that it plans to allow private operators to sell VoIP services if they agree to share revenues with the state.³¹

While speaking at the Arab Internet Governance Forum in November 2014, Suzan Hajj Hobeiche, the head of the Cybercrimes Bureau, stated that the bureau was monitoring terrorist content in light of the rise of the Islamic State, and possessed the ability to filter such content.³² Digital media specialists in Lebanon have expressed doubt over the bureau's abilities in this regard, though the government's intention to filter the web is cause for concern.

25 Samir Kassir Eyes, «لإفطالاب شرحتال عحفاالم راطل يف ةيحباب عقاو ةتس بححب رمات ةماعال ةباينل»، [General Prosecutor Orders the blocking of Six Porn sites], Skeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, September, 2, 2014, <http://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/Lebanon/4728>.

26 Eyes, «لإفطالاب شرحتال عحفاالم راطل يف ةيحباب عقاو ةتس بححب رمات ةماعال ةباينل»، [General Prosecutor Orders the blocking of Six Porn sites].

27 Imad Bazzi, «كنا نبل يف ةيحباب إل عقاو لمل تبجح ادا ملو فيك» [How and Why Six Porn Websites were Banned in Lebanon], September, 3, 2014, <http://trella.org/4234>.

28 Alexa, "Top Sites in Lebanon," accessed March 1, 2013, <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LB>.

29 Imad Atalla, "Lebanon is stifling your digital freedom," *The Daily Star*, June 8, 2010, <http://bit.ly/1QoURu9>.

30 Telecoms 2013 Progress Report, January 3, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1oa28kP>.

31 Telecoms 2013 Progress Report, January 3, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1oa28kP>.

32 Dhouha Ben Youssef, "Arab IGF III: What we will remember," *Nawaat*, December 3, 2014, <http://nawaat.org/portail/2014/12/03/arab-igf-iii-what-we-will-remember/>.

Content Removal

While filtering remains rare, there have been limited incidents in which government security officials pressured individuals and ISPs to remove certain comments—mainly criticism of government officials or the army—from social media pages, blogs, or websites. One of the most prominent instances over the past year took place in November 2014, when Judge Nadim Zwein issued a decree obliging the newspaper *Al-Akhbar* to remove a report from its website discussing corruption at the American University of Beirut (AUB) in response to a request from the university.³³

Meanwhile, online media outlets and blogs usually have a disclaimer on their comment section making clear that they may remove any comments that include foul language or fall outside of the ethical codes. According to one expert, there is no law that clarifies who can be held liable for user generated content, such as comments. Nonetheless, there have no recent cases of intermediaries being prosecuted.³⁴

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

Despite evidence of some filtering, taboo subjects that would normally be banned from mainstream media outlets, such as pornography, content supportive of Israel, and sectarian hate speech, are generally available online. However, self-censorship is prominent in the blogosphere and in the country's top media outlets, which are owned by powerful figures from all sides of the political spectrum. Users often fear repercussions from the government or certain political and sectarian groups. LGBTI forums are usually banned in Lebanon in accordance with the penal code, which considers any act of advertising or supporting LGBTI issues as a crime.

Online advertising in Lebanon has grown in recent years but remains relatively weak, partly due to the slowness and unreliability of the internet. In addition, advertising agencies have yet to grasp the internet as an advertising platform, and local websites remain ill-equipped to handle sophisticated online ads.³⁵ Whereas affluent politicians are known to purchase bulk subscriptions to newspapers and magazines in order to influence coverage, online advertising remains too small of a sector to be targeted by political groups and businesses. In fact, the majority of advertising revenue continues to go to television and other traditional media, while online sources make up two percent of the total advertising market.³⁶

Lebanese users have access to a wide variety of local and international information sources. Reflecting Lebanon's pluralistic society, Lebanese media is highly partisan and controlled by the dominant political-sectarian actors, mainly through direct ownership of prominent media outlets.³⁷ For example, former prime minister Saad Hariri owns Future TV, *al-Mustaqbal*, *the Daily Star*, and a host of other online and offline media outlets. Similarly, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri owns National Broadcasting Network and its affiliates, while Hezbollah controls a vast network of media outlets, in-

33 Samir Kassir Eyes, « «رابط خال» تدير جملتي تال جع تسم ال روم ال يضاق », [Judge forces Al Akhbar Newspaper to remove a Report from its Website], Skeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, November 21, 2014, <http://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/Jordan/4874>.

34 Interview with President of ICT committee in the Beirut BAR association and Dr. Charbel Kareh, Head of communication committee in Internet Society - Lebanon chapter, April, 8, 2015.

35 Elias Sakr, "Online advertising untapped in Lebanon," *The Daily Star*, April 20, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1Q1IH9T>.

36 Elias Sakr, "Online advertising untapped in Lebanon," *The Daily Star*, April 20, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1Q1IH9T>.

37 Melki et. Al., *Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon*, 21-22.

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cluding al-Manar TV and al-Nour radio. The heads of these media outlets are chosen by these dominant political figures, and their news content clearly advances a particular partisan message. While ensuring plurality, this also creates a climate in which the public sphere is dominated by the agendas of powerful political-sectarian leaders and their allies, suffocating the voices of those who fall outside the main groups.³⁸ At the same time, politicians are known to bribe the few independent news outlets and journalists that do exist, particularly during election periods.

Digital Activism

Civil society groups have used social media widely and effectively to mobilize support for their causes related to LGBTI rights, women's rights, press freedom, and prisoners' rights. Over the past year, activists used social media to lobby in support of the right to civil marriage,³⁹ including the right to register children in civil marriages. Activists also revealed contradictions in Minister of Interior Nuhad el Mashnouk's statements in support of civil marriage before he became a minister.⁴⁰ Social media further helped activists mobilize demonstrations against the second extension of parliament's term.⁴¹

Violations of User Rights

Lebanon's weak legal environment, overzealous interrogations by the Cybercrime Bureau, and ongoing surveillance remained a grave threat to user rights over the past year. The country continues to lack a legal framework for online media, instead applying harsh defamation laws have been used to curtail investigative reporting and criticism of public authorities. While no users were reportedly sentenced to jail time over the coverage period, the Cybercrime Bureau continued to interrogate and detain individuals for their online speech, largely as an intimidation tactic. The pervasive power of the security forces is also apparent in the realm of surveillance, where blanket requests for user data have resulted in high profile political disputes between rival factions.

Legal Environment

The Lebanese constitution guarantees freedom of expression as well as freedom of the press, although those rights have not always been respected in practice. Violations of press freedom typically receive an immediate and passionate reaction from the public, serving as a powerful check against the government's actions in this domain. However, no specific legal provisions relate specifically to online speech, and many have been anticipating a new law for over a decade. Meanwhile, courts apply these and other traditional media laws to the online sphere in an inconsistent and often contradictory fashion.⁴² This has produced a confusing legal environment with overlapping jurisdictions and contradictory laws governing online content, including the civil laws, penal code, publications law, audiovisual law, elections law, and military code of justice.⁴³ Three serious attempts to develop

38 Melki et. Al., *Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon*, 56-58.

39 Sophie Chamas, "When weddings become protests: the debate over civil marriage in Lebanon," *National Desert News*, March 18, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1gafxJI>.

40 Asrar Chbaro, "Lebanon Reconsiders Civil Marriage," *Al Monitor*, February 5, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1OduJ6t>.

41 "Lebanon Parliament Extends Term," *NOW*.

42 Melki, et. al., *Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon*, 86.

43 Melki, et. al., *Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon*, 89.

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new media laws have generated heated national debates in the past three years, although none so far have led to any concrete results.⁴⁴

From a legal perspective, the most serious threat to internet users and online journalists remains the country's slander and libel laws. Under Article 588 of the Lebanese penal code, defaming the president carries a sentence of 3 to 12 months in prison, while defaming the army or other public figures carries a sentence of up to 6 months.⁴⁵ The appeals process is often drawn out and highly politicized. In practice, however, most online users targeted with such accusations are quickly released, and the cases are usually forgotten or dropped under public or political pressure. However, even if the cases tend to wither away with little or no legal action, they almost always generate heated public debates and protests.

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Court trials and prison sentences against individuals for online posts were not common over the coverage period. Instead, security forces often detain users or call them in for interrogations, particularly at the Bureau for Cybercrimes. The bureau was created in 2006 without a formal legislative decree setting out its activities or defining a "cybercrime."⁴⁶ In fact, the bureau often acts with little regard to the law. In November 2014, agents misled Karim Hawwa into reporting to the bureau on the false claim that he had purchased a stolen smartphone. Instead, Hawwa was detained for four days and interrogated regarding the sharing of a news article on his Facebook page accusing Minister of Interior Nuhad al-Mashnouk of providing a contract to a company affiliated with Israel.⁴⁷ Hawwa was unable to call a lawyer during the time he was held in custody, and his mother was obliged to bring in his personal laptop to the bureau, which authorities did not immediately return to Hawwa upon his release.⁴⁸

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

The laws regulating surveillance and the acquisition of communications data are vague and widely disputed. Attempts to develop clear privacy laws and regulations have failed, mainly because of their highly politicized nature. Currently, the typical process for acquiring user data involves a request from the Internal Security Forces (ISF) to the Ministry of Interior (or from the army to the Ministry of Defense), which is then sent to the prime minister for approval. The order is then sent to the telecommunications minister for execution—although in some instances the latter has refused to hand over the data to the ISF. This process was approved by the cabinet of ministries in 2009 as part of an agreement to share communications data with security and military officials. However, those who dispute this process, particularly the last three telecommunications ministers, cite the need to obey privacy laws, and insist that the government's 2009 decision is limited to metadata and does not cover requests for the content of communications and other specific data. During their respective

44 International Research and Exchange Board, "Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Lebanon," in *Media Sustainability Index 2010/2011*, (Washington D.C.: IREX, 2012) <http://bit.ly/1NqhOyU>.

45 Lebanese Army, "Slander and libel and sanctions in Lebanese law crimes," [in Arabic], 2010, <http://bit.ly/1IYP0Wp>.

46 Legal Agenda, "Bureau of Cybercrimes: An Unorganized Online Censorship," [in Arabic] <http://bit.ly/1KavsU6>.

47 "Cybercrime Bureau's ever-growing powers threatening freedoms in Lebanon," Al Akhbar, November 22, 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/22605>.

48 Samir Kassir Eyes, « ريزوب مدلل او حدقل قمه تب مايا 4 هف قويو اوح ميرك طشان ال جردت سي تي نورتك ل ال ا مكارجل ا تحف الكم بتاكم », [Bureau of Cybercrimes Tricks Activist Karim Hawwa and arrests him for Four Days], Skeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, November, 18, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1JWe5Fa>.

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periods in office, the ministers argued that large-scale, broad requests from the ISF should be accompanied by a court order.

Lebanon's first draft law on personal data protection is reportedly under discussion at the parliament.⁴⁹ While ISPs and mobile phone providers are state-owned, observers noted that data was only shared with security forces if they received a court order for a limited time interval and a limited number of users. Individuals are not usually required to show any form of ID for obtaining a prepaid SIM card, however some points of sale required it for security reasons.

Intimidation and Violence

Physical acts of violence in retaliation for online speech were rare in Lebanon. One incident was reported in January 2015 involving Faisal el-Qassem, an Al-Jazeera journalist based in Beirut and known for his opposition to the Assad regime, who was subjected to a massive online and offline attack campaign after he shared a picture mocking the achievements of the Lebanese Army on his personal Facebook page. The campaign resulted in angry protestors breaking into Al-Jazeera's offices in Beirut demanding an apology from the Syrian journalist⁵⁰ and filing a law suit filed against him.⁵¹

Technical Attacks

As of 2015, the government has not yet published a strategy to defend against cyberattacks, which have been on the rise.⁵² Several government and news websites were attacked over the past year. The website of the Lebanese Patriarchy was hacked by unknown assailants in April 2014, who posted verses from the Quran.⁵³ The website of the municipality of Zahleh⁵⁴ was hacked on June 23, 2014, while Tripoli's website was completely erased on June, 11, 2014.⁵⁵

The National News Agency website was brought offline for a full day on January, 13, 2015, during which it had to suspend news operations.⁵⁶ The news website *Lebanon Debate* was subject to a double hacking attempt from IP addresses in Lebanon and the United States on March, 24, 2015; however, the website was able to retrieve its archive and republished under a new domain.⁵⁷ One of the

49 Interview with President of ICT committee in the Beirut BAR association and Dr. Charbel Kareh, Head of communication committee in Internet Society - Lebanon chapter, April, 8, 2015.

50 Samir Kassir Eyes, « «مېت اغېموا» ءعومجم », « ءرېرچل » رقم محتقت «مېت اغېموا» ءعومجم », [Omega Team breaks Through Aljazeera Bureau because of Journalist Faysal Qassem post about Lebanese Army], Skeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, September, 29, 2014, <http://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/Lebanon/4773>.

51 Samir Kassir Eyes, « «مساؤل لصيف يرسل يف احصلا قح ب رحت و تحب غالب رصيفي يزيفي متلا ماعلا يمحملا », [General Prosecutor Orders the Arrest of Syrian Journalist Faysal Al Qassem], Skeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, January, 15, 2015, <http://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/Lebanon/4971>.

52 Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, "Cybersecurity in Lebanon," <http://bit.ly/1eiJpe0>.

53 Samir Kassir Eyes, « «مينورتكلل اإل ىكركب عقوم ءنصرق », [Hacking Bkerki Website], Skeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, April, 16, 2014, <http://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/Lebanon/4368>.

54 Samir Kassir Eyes, « «مينورتكلل اإل ءقلا عملا - ءلحز ءيڊلب عقوم ءنصرق », [Hacking the Website of the Municipality of Zahle], Skeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, June, 23, 2014, <http://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/Lebanon/4552>.

55 Samir Kassir Eyes, « «تنترتن اإل ءكبش نع اتقوم ءتل ازاو سلبارط ءيڊلب عقوم ءنصرق », [Hacking the Website of the Municipality of Tripoli], Skeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, June, 11, 2014, <http://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/Lebanon/4537>.

56 Samir Kassir Eyes, « «مالع اإل ءينطولا ءل الكولا عقوم ءنصرق », [Hacking the Website of the National News Agency], Skeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, January, 13, 2015, <http://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/Lebanon/4964>.

57 Samir Kassir Eyes, « «ءنصرق لل صرءتي يرابع اإل «تبابي نونابيل» عقوم », [Hacking Lebanon Debate Website], Skeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, March, 24, 2015, <http://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/Lebanon/5061>.

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most well-known Lebanese and Arab blogs, Trella, was subject to a cyberattack on April 11, 2015, in which hackers threatened to erase the blog's archive since 2004.⁵⁸

58 Samir Kassir Eyes, «البيروت» قنّوم «، [Hacking Trella Blog], Skeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, April, 11, 2014, <http://www.skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/Lebanon/4360>.