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PRESS RELEASE

Jordan: ARTICLE 19 Working in Partnership to Enhance Free Expression Across Middle East

Twenty journalists, lawyers and human rights activists from Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia met yesterday to map a way forward for free speech in the Middle East at a workshop convened by ARTICLE 19 in Amman, Jordan. Participants joined forces to renew and strengthen efforts to enhance freedom of expression across the region, against a backdrop of restrictive laws and practices in many countries.

Comprehensive legal and policy reforms are crucial in combating the draconian restrictions that confine journalists, writers, activists and others who speak out against authority, or who challenge cultural or political norms. Often, these individuals risk extreme penalties for expressing diverse views, including custodial sentences, fines, harassment and abuse.

In particular, defamation is a criminal offence in all countries across the region and, contrary to international standards, defamation laws provide special protection for the reputations of government and public officials, state institutions and ruling families. Anti-terrorism and national security laws are also exploited to suppress legitimate criticism of the government, and to censor and arrest journalists and political activists. The phenomena of “soft containment”, patronage and “self-censorship” further limits the number and diversity of viewpoints expressed in the public domain.

New technologies have created unprecedented opportunities, however, to bypass state-controlled information channels and create platforms for public debate, and these have been eagerly and skilfully employed in even the most repressive countries. Governments have responded by monitoring, censoring and directing web-based content – websites are blocked or shut down, chat room conversations are tracked and messages are censored. Bloggers, who are often at the cutting edge of free expression, are regularly arrested, prosecuted and harassed or harmed for criticising governments and exposing human rights abuses, while also being deprived of even the limited protections enjoyed by professional journalists.

Restrictive laws and practices aimed at stifling free speech are replicated around the region with worrying speed, according to participants. “*Attacks on freedom of expression are like swine flu,*” comments Yahia Shukkeir, a Jordanian media expert. “*A sneeze of suppression in one country directly propagates a virus across the region.*”

Reforms may be hampered by limited awareness of the importance of human rights in general, and freedom of expression in particular, for development, democracy and dialogue in the region. As Raufa Hassan al-Sharki, a prominent academic and human rights activist from Yemen, notes, “*Unfortunately, freedom is often understood by its limitations rather than opportunities.*”

The meeting aimed to enhance advocacy for freedom of expression and identify opportunities for a holistic approach across the region. Participants stressed the need to promote existing international standards and best practices on content restrictions, in particular in the contexts of “national security”, defamation, hate speech and public morals. They identified gaps in knowledge across the region and a need for further research on the extent and nature of restrictive laws and practice, measured against international standards, as a foundation for further advocacy. International support for domestic litigation and advocacy with an exchange of comparative jurisprudence across the region should be provided for local lawyers representing journalists, bloggers and activists, as well as support for legal professionals, members of the judiciary and law enforcement agencies.

ARTICLE 19 and these workshop participants hope, by working together across borders, to make a marked contribution to rejuvenated efforts for the promotion and protection of free speech across the Middle East.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

- For more information, please contact Sa’eda Kilani, ARTICLE 19 Middle East Programme Officer, tel: +962 795 5 78880 (mobile) or email saeda@article19.org.
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.