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Middle East/North Africa - Tunisia

Joint statement

Death threats and attacks on freedom of expression intensify in Tunisia

6 March 2013

(Tunis, 4 March 2013) - The following is an open letter to the authorities in Tunisia, initiated by the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA), Norwegian PEN, PEN International WiPC and Index on Censorship and signed by 20 other IFEX members:

Death threats and attacks on freedom of expression intensify in Tunisia

Death threats, physical attacks, an emergence of hate speech and accusations of official censorship of critical media have escalated the perilous situation for freedom of expression in Tunisia. As the political crisis deepens following the assassination of outspoken left-wing political leader Chokri Belaïd, and the resignation on Tuesday 26 February of Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, attacks against journalists and writers have intensified.

The undersigned members of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) call on the Tunisian government to condemn such attacks, guarantee the safety of journalists, writers and media workers reporting on the on-going crisis, and implement legislation available to them that better protects freedom of expression.

Death Threats

Tunisia has witnessed an unprecedented campaign of death threats against journalists, writers and media workers critical of the ruling Ennahda Party and its handling of recent events.

Most disturbingly, a 'death list' of names of prominent writers and journalists who supposedly "antagonise Islam" is said to be in circulation, with writer and journalist **Naziha Rjiba** one of those to have received anonymous telephone death threats. It is widely believed the League for Protecting the Revolution – said to have close ties with the Ennahda Party - issued the list. Rjiba received a call shortly after the assassination of Belaïd in which she was warned to be silent or else "she would be next."

On 11 February, journalists **Nawfel El Ouertani** and **Haitham El Mekki** from *Radio Mosaïque FM* had their lives threatened for their coverage of Belaïd's funeral. The station had already been the recipient of threats and had applied to the Ministry of Interior for protection.

Veteran journalist and former head of the National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT), **Neji Bghouri**, has received a number of death threats via email and mobile phone. The latest incident occurred on 14 February when a member of the League for Protecting the Revolution reportedly shouted, "soon, you'll be killed." **Najiba Hamrouni**, current head of the SNJT, has also reported receiving death threats from unknown callers who accuse her of defaming the Ennahda Party and "insulting Islam".

The undersigned IFEX members are seriously alarmed by these developments and call on the Tunisian authorities to urgently provide those targeted with a safe environment in which to carry out their work. They also call on authorities to fully investigate those responsible for issuing such threats so as to deter a climate of impunity in the country.

Attacks on Freedom of Expression Escalate

The undersigned IFEX members consider the 22 January decision by deputy leader of the National Constitutional Assembly, Mehrezia Labidi, to ban journalists from working inside the Assembly as a deliberate attempt to deny access to information, and call on the authorities to recall the decision.

Harassment and physical attacks are also on the rise. On 24 January police interrogated *Al-Shorouk* journalist, **Mouna Bouazizi**, following a complaint by a local official over her coverage of events in the city of Qarjani. Bouazizi has been repeatedly harassed and prevented from carrying out her work.

Reports suggest that security forces have deliberately targeted journalists covering the fallout from the assassination of Belaïd. On 7 February, police in Gafsa City attacked *Tunisia Africa News Agency* journalist, **Farida al-Mabrouki** as she covered clashes with protesters. In a similar incident, **Shraz Al-Khunaisi**, a journalist with Internet TV channel *Tunis Al-Ikhbariya*, was also attacked and dragged to the ground by police.

Another journalist for the same channel, **Ahmad Akkouni**, was hit by a rubber bullet while covering clashes between police and protesters in Tunis. The following day, police officers physically attacked **Tarek Al-Ghorani**, a photographer and staff member with the Tunis Centre for the Freedom of Press, as he took pictures at Belaïd's funeral.

In addition, rapper and playwright Mohamed Amine Al-Hamzaoui required hospital treatment following a severe assault by up to five police officers that took place as he participated in the funeral. Al-Hamzaoui is known for [songs criticising police attacks on protesters](#).

Hate speech

Evidence is emerging that the media are being subjected to a deliberate campaign of hate speech during prayer ceremonies and in political discourses. Prayer leaders in several mosques across Tunisia have blamed journalists and writers for either "insulting Islam" or "hindering the work of the Ennahda Party", while journalists criticised by politicians have reportedly been the victims of reprisal attacks.

During the 15 February rally held in support of the Ennahda Party in Tunis, widespread anti-media rhetoric was heard from speakers and marchers alike. Shouts of "shameless media" accompanied physical attacks against journalists covering the event. A prevalence of graffiti slogans stating "Journalists are liars" and "Journalists are hypocrites" can also be seen on the streets of the capital.

Broadcast woes

The independence of the broadcast media has been called further into question following the unplanned proliferation of new radio stations and TV channels across the country, many of which are owned by pro-government, Ennahda Party supporters.

The government has also been accused of silencing a number of emerging independent radio stations by withdrawing frequencies under the pretext of unpaid license fees. On 12 February, *Oxygen Radio Bizerte* was shut down for 24 hours, a move seen by Tunisian human rights groups as political interference aimed at silencing critical voices.

The undersigned IFEX members repeat calls for the Tunisian authorities to appoint an independent body that has the power to organise the audio-visual licensing system fairly and without political bias.

Legislative stalling

Despite public statements on 10 December 2012 announcing the adoption of long-overdue legislation, and with it the establishment of the Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communications (HAICA), the undersigned IFEX members note little change regarding the implementation of the government's media laws, particularly in respect to decrees 115 and 116 concerning media freedom.

As a crucial step in guaranteeing the safety of journalists, the undersigned IFEX members again call on the Tunisian authorities to implement these decrees as a matter of urgency. For the independence of the media to be assured, wider consultation should also be sought from civil society and journalist organisations to supply HAICA with a broader more legitimate mandate for change.

Signed,

[World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers](#)

[Index on Censorship](#)

[Norwegian PEN](#)

[Writers in Prison Committee, PEN International](#)

[Bahrain Center for Human Rights](#)

[Canadian Journalists for Free Expression](#)

[Cartoonists Rights Network International](#)

[Center for Media Studies & Peace Building](#)

[Committee to Protect Journalists](#)

[Freedom Forum](#)

[Fundamedios - Andean Foundation for Media Observation & Study](#)

[I'lam Media Center for Arab Palestinians in Israel - INTERIM MEMBER](#)

[Independent Journalism Center](#)

[Institute for the Studies on Free Flow of Information](#)

[International Press Institute](#)

[International Publishers Association](#)

[Maharat Foundation](#)

[Media Rights Agenda](#)

[National Union of Somali Journalists](#)

[Pacific Islands News Association](#)

[Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms - MADA](#)

[Public Association "Journalists"](#)

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[World Press Freedom Committee](#)
