

Internet in the Arab World during the First Quarter of 2019

1- Egypt

The Legal Environment

The Supreme Media Council's bylaws

On 18 March, the "Supreme Media Regulatory Council", headed by Makram Mohamed Ahmed, issued a list of sanctions that apply to entities subject to the provisions of the Law Regulating the Press and Media, along with all media outlets including websites.

Infrastructure of the Internet and Telecommunications Sector

During the first quarter of 2019, specifically on February 4, the Prime Minister granted the National Service Projects Organization (NSPO) of the Armed Forces the right to establish a joint stock company; with the purpose of forming, running, operating and maintaining telecommunication stations and networks, and satellites.

Egypt's population hit 98.5 million in March, and the number of internet subscribers has exceeded 56.2 million, including 45.5 million Facebook users and 7.5 million Twitter users, as the number of tweets posted by Egyptians on Twitter reached 2.9 million tweets per day.

Blocking websites

The Supreme Media Council blocks "Al-Mashhad" website and fines its newspaper

On 21 March, the Supreme Media Regulatory Council issued a decision to block Al-Mashhad newspaper website for six months and ordered the newspaper to pay a 50,000EGP fine; for allegedly defaming one of women media personalities and a group of actresses by publishing inappropriate photos of them on its website.

The Ministry of Education fails to deliver exams via the Internet

Egypt's Ministry of Education has tried to use the Internet services in the examination of the first-year high school students for the first time this year, but it failed to hold the Arabic language exam as scheduled on 24 March. Students complained they could not access the

electronic exam platform of the new (tablet-based) system, and the ministry interpreted this failure as "a system malfunction".

Malak al-Kashef arrested over a Facebook post

Following a train crash in Cairo's central train station on 27 February, which killed at least 22 people and injured many others, calls for protests went viral on both Facebook and Twitter under the slogan "Returning back to Tahrir (Square)".

In response to these calls, the security services launched a random arrest campaign targeting a number of young people including Malak al-Kashef, who was arrested from her home during a dawn raid on March 6 before she appeared the next day before the State Security Prosecution. Al-Kashef was interrogated over case No. 1739 (State Security) in which she faces charges of joining a terrorist group and using an online account (Facebook) to commit a crime punishable by law; against the backdrop of expressing her opinion, via her personal account on Facebook, on the train crash which killed dozens of citizens.

2- Saudi Arabia

Infrastructure of the Internet and Telecommunications Sector

The number of Internet users amongst Saudi Arabia's total population of 33.4 million has reached 29 million, 17 million of which are Facebook users while Twitter users are estimated at about 11.2 million.

Banning "WhatsApp" calls

Voice and video calling service on WhatsApp was blocked again, after it suddenly worked in the morning of 12 March and lasted for hours before the service was down once more.

It is noteworthy that the Minister of Communications and Information Technology announced, more than a year ago, the lifting of the ban on all applications that provide voice and video call services over the Internet-known as VoIP protocol .

He also asserted that the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) would oversee whether the applications meet regulatory requirements in the Kingdom, and would work with telecommunications companies to enable blocking or unblocking services in line with these requirements.

Prosecuting social media users

On March 19, the Criminal Court in Riyadh sentenced a citizen to one year in prison and ordered him to pay a 5,000 Saudi riyal fine; for allegedly writing tweets deemed offensive to the judiciary and for questioning the integrity and honesty of the Kingdom's judges.

3- Jordan

Infrastructure of the Internet and Telecommunications Sector

Jordan has a population of approximately 10.4 million; Internet users reach around 9 million with 5.3 million people using Facebook and 480,000 using Twitter.

Violations of Internet freedom

Communications Ministry blocks two ride-hailing apps

On 19 March, the Ministry of Communications agreed to block "Jeeny" and "Queenie", smartphone applications for ride sharing, after the Head of the House's Public Services and Transport Committee received demands from the "yellow taxi" owners to shut down the two apps and all other smart applications that have wiped out their entire fleet.

Banning 45 websites

The Jordanian authorities have blocked 45 websites that did not comply with the government's decision and obligation to get a license during the period set by the Jordan Media Commission (JMC) which ended on Sunday evening, February 17.

On the other hand, a total of 69 news websites have been licensed since the beginning of this year, after fulfilling all licensing requirements and procedures whereby their license will remain until 2020.

"Jordanian" news website blocked

Jordan's authorities blocked "Jordanian" news website after hours since its launch on Sunday March 19 on the pretext of breaching the licensing requirements set in the Press and Publications Law; since the website delivers news content relating to Jordan although it is operated from outside the country.

It is worth noting that this website was established by a group of Jordanian youth living abroad; with the objective to get rid of the restrictions imposed on media freedoms in the Kingdom of Jordan and to benefit from media freedoms in the countries in which they reside.

4- Sudan

Sudan's population is estimated at 42 million people. Telecommunication services in Sudan are offered by three companies; "Zain", MTN and "Sudani".

The Internet has become the only arena for the exchange of views and information in a country where traditional media outlets are tightly controlled by the state. The number of internet users in Sudan has reached nearly 13.2 million with a growing interest in social media during the past months, as the number of Facebook users has amounted to 7 million while Twitter users reach 250,000.

Violations of Internet freedoms

Authorities ban some social media websites

In early January, the Sudanese authorities blocked a number of social media websites that citizens used to organize demonstrations protesting against the country's deteriorating economic conditions before they were extended to demand the ouster of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir.

Users of the three Internet service providers in Sudan said access to Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp has no longer been possible, except by using a virtual private network (VPN).

5- Bahrain

Infrastructure of the Internet and Telecommunications Sector

Internet services

Bahrain's population has reached about 1.6 million residents in the first quarter of 2019, out of which there are about one million Facebook users and nearly 600,000 Twitter users.

Violations of Internet freedoms

Ebrahim Sharif sentenced to prison over a tweet supporting Sudan's protests

On 13 March, a Bahraini court sentenced Bahraini opposition leader Ebrahim Sharif- former secretary general of National Democratic Action Society (Wa'ad)-to six months in jail and 500 BD fine to stop the execution of sentence for allegedly "insulting president of a foreign country", against the backdrop of a tweet in which he supports the demonstrations took place in Sudan.

Court of Cassation upholds the prison sentence issued against Nabeel Rajab

On 31 December 2018, Bahrain's Court of Cassation turned down the appeal filed by prominent human rights defender and founder of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) Nabeel Rajab challenging a five-year prison sentence handed to him, in relation to Twitter comments he posted on 21 February 2018 condemning the Saudi intervention in Yemen and his detention conditions at Jaw Prison.

6- United Arab Emirates

Infrastructure of the Internet and Telecommunications Sector

The United Arab Emirates is ranked first in terms of Internet penetration levels among the world's population, according to the "2019 Edelman Trust Barometer", as the percentage of Internet usage and prevalence among its inhabitants reached 98% in 2018.

According to official statistics, the population of the UAE during the first quarter of 2019 is estimated at 9.6 million, of which there are about 9.4 million Internet users; including 8.8 million Facebook users at time Twitter users are amounted to 2.6 million.

Violations against online activists

Social media activist sentenced to 10 years in prison

On March 27, Abu Dhabi Court of Appeal sentenced a 45-year-old social media activist to 10 years in prison, for allegedly "publishing false media articles and information that is offensive to UAE community, stirring up rife, instigating unrest and harming the social cohesion and national unity."

The continued detention of Osama al-Najjar

Human rights activist Osama al-Najjar has already spent two years inside UAE's al-Razeen prison after authorities extended his prison imprisonment despite serving his full three-year prison term, on charges pertaining to the practicing of his right to freedom of expression on social media.

Al-Najjar was due to be freed On 17 March 2017 after serving his sentence, but instead the authorities ruled to transfer him to a so-called counselling centre claiming that he represents a "terrorist threat" to the country.

Al-Najjar was arrested by UAE State Security Service officers on 17 March 2014, after he posted a tweet condemning the serious violations endured by his father, Hussein Al-Najjar, who is being held pending the case known as the 'UAE94'.

UN Rights Office urges UAE to release human rights defender Ahmed Mansour

On January 4, the United Nations Human Rights Office expressed concern that the conviction of prominent Emirati human rights defender Ahmed Mansour and his harsh sentencing relate to his exercise of the right to freedom of expression and opinion.

The office's statement comes against the backdrop of the UAE State Security Court's upholding, on December 31, a 10-year prison sentence accompanied by a fine of 1 million dirham (\$272,000) that was issued against Mansour.

In May 2018, Mansour was convicted of using social media to "publish false information that would harm national unity and damage the country's reputation", in connection with posting tweets critical of the government.

7- Oman

Infrastructure of the Internet and Telecommunications Sector

Oman has a population of 5.1 million, as revealed by latest statistics. The number of Internet users reached 3.93 million, of which there are 2.7 million Facebook users and about 230,000 Twitter users.

Prosecuting social media activists

Oman's Internal Security Service (ISS) has launched a new wave of arrests targeting dozens of online activists who announced their rejection at the meeting held between the Oman's Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs and the Israeli Prime Minister in the Polish capital Warsaw on February 13, in addition to rejecting all forms of normalization with the Israeli occupation state, following the sudden visit of the Israeli Prime Minister to Amman in late October. Among those detained are:

Musab al-Dhuhle arrested over Twitter comments

On February 17, the Internal Security Service (ISS) arrested online activist Musab al-Dhuhle from Nizwa state. He was summoned by ISS because of his critical views shared on his Twitter personal account, in which he criticized the government's normalization

with Israel, and for his support of the Palestinian case and cause, and since then he has been held incommunicado in prison.

ISS arrests an Omani citizen over tweets

Haitham al-Mashaykhi arrested for "Facebook" posts

On February 18, the Internal Security Service summoned the well-known activist Haitham al-Mashaykhi, before he was held in incommunicado detention, which is believed to be in relation to some posts Mashaykhi shared via his "Facebook" personal account, in which he criticized the relationship between the Omani authorities and Israel, in addition to some publications denouncing the country's high unemployment rate.

Activist Bader al-Arimi released

On 17 January 2019, security services freed social media activist Bader al-Arimi after nearly a month in detention. Al- Arimi was arrested against the backdrop of his writings on social networking websites, where he declared his support for the Palestinian cause and criticized the government for its inaction to provide job opportunities for qualified and employable citizens.

8- Iraq

The Central Statistical Organization (CSO) estimates the population of Iraq at about 40 million, noting that the last population census for all Iraq's cities was conducted in 1987.

Telecommunication sector's activity is witnessing an upturn; as the Iraqi government is installing thousands of new fiber optic cables and re-operating damaged mobile networks.

Despite having suffered political unrest, this country is experiencing dramatic growth in the number of mobile broadband services' subscribers; early signs of stability have encouraged telecommunication companies to invest in this sector especially that Iraq has had the potential to rebuild and regain its economic strength relying on its considerable oil and gas reserves.

The number of Internet users is estimated at about 10.5 million users, of which there are 8.5 million people who use Facebook and 280,000 who use Twitter.

The legal environment

The Deputy Speaker of the Iraqi Council of Representatives held on March 26, 2019, a meeting with the Heads of Security, Defence, Legal, Cultural, Human Rights, Labor and

Services and Higher Education committees to discuss drafting "Cybercrime and Freedom of Expression Law".

The bill constitutes a crackdown on freedom of expression on the Internet; as it imposes harsh penalties of imprisonment and heavy fines against opinion-makers who express their views on the Internet.

Infrastructure of the Internet and Telecommunications Sector

Iraq has a population of approximately 40.4 million, and the number of Internet users reached 19 million in December 2018, which accounts for 47% of the population, 17 million people of which are Facebook users.

Iraq's Communications and Media Commission (CMC) and the Ministry of Communications (MoC) are competent to run, manage and license telecommunications companies in Iraq, and MoC is particularly responsible for operating the Iraqi Telecommunication and Post Company (ITPC) together with the General Company for Internet Services. As for the General Company for Telecommunications, it is in charge of the fiber-optic network, whereas the General Company for Post & Telecommunications deals with subscribers of Internet services and communications in Iraq, and provides wireless Internet service for government agencies.

Internet submarine cable disruption/outage

The Ministry of Communications' General Company for Communications and Informatics stated, on March 26, that the submarine (undersea) cable, which is considered one of the most important Internet sources in Iraq, was cut off Monday morning.

9- Morocco

Infrastructure of the Internet and Telecommunications Sector

The population of Morocco in 2018 was around 36.6 million, and the number of Internet users in the first quarter of 2019 has reached 22.7 million, of which there are about 12 million Facebook users, while the number of Twitter subscribers is estimated at about 300,000.

Prosecuting social media activists

Two young people arrested over tweets rejecting Pope Francis' visit to Morocco

On March 30, the security services in Rabat arrested a Quran reciter and preacher named Mohamed El Kasaby, known as the "Muayqali of Morocco", the imam of a mosque in the city of Temara, along with another young man named Ayoub al-Kareini, in connection to tweets rejecting Pope Francis' visit to Morocco. The two young men were released the next day.

500 websites are awaiting the ban

On March 11, the Minister of Culture and Communication emphasized that the grace period granted by the government to news websites to legalize their status in accordance with Law No. 88.13 on the Press and publication has come to an end. The minister also reported that out of 850 websites requesting licenses before the Public Prosecution; only 315 electronic newspapers have reconciled their situation, while more than 500 websites haven't yet ensured their legal status.

Sufian Al-Nakad sentenced to prison

On the 11th of last February, the Court of Appeal in Tetouan sentenced activist Sufian Al-Nakad to one year in prison and a fine of 2,000 Moroccan Dirhams (about 208 US dollars); for allegedly "inciting riots and harming state security", against the backdrop of publishing a post on his "Facebook" personal account, calling for joining the demonstration held to protest against the killing of a young Moroccan woman; Hayat Belkacem who was shot dead after the Royal Moroccan Navy opened fire on an immigration boat heading to Spain carrying a group of Moroccan immigrants.

Osama al-Khulaifi sentenced to 3 months in prison

On Friday evening, January 18th, the Court of First Instance in Salé city sentenced Moroccan activist Osama al-Khalifi, to a three-month prison sentence and a fine of 5,000 dirhams (about \$ 500), over a Facebook post in which he called for "slitting the throats" of members of the Moroccan Justice and Development Party (JDP) and "hanging them up in Mohamed V Street."

10- Algeria

Social networking websites, first and foremost "Facebook", have played pivotal role in making hundreds of thousands of demonstrators take to the street on Friday, February 22, to protest against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's candidacy for a fifth term in the presidential election scheduled to take place on 18 April 2019, despite the fact that the Algerian government has banned protests in the capital since 2001.

Infrastructure of the Internet and Telecommunications Sector

Algeria has a population of about 42.7 million, with the number of Internet subscribers reaching 21.3 million, including 18 million Facebook users and 300,000 Twitter users.

Prosecuting social media activists

Blogger Marzouk Touati released after spending 2 years in jail

On 3 March 2019, the Algerian authorities ordered the release of blogger Marzouk Touati, 30, after mitigating the penalty to a 5 year prison sentence, including two (unsuspended) years in jail, which he already served on a charge of "spying for a foreign body".

Touati was initially handed a 10 year prison sentence by a court of first instance in May 2017; for providing "intelligence to agents of a foreign power that is likely to harm Algeria's military or diplomatic position or its essential economic interests", after he published on his blog an interview with an Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesperson, and for his call for demonstrations.

A month later, an appeals court reduced the sentence to seven years, before the Supreme Court overturned the sentence in January referring the case once again to a court of appeal in Skikda, 500 kilometers east of Algiers.

Activist Hadj Ghermoul sentenced to 6 months in prison

On 6 February 2019, a court in Algeria sentenced Algerian activist to six months in prison and fined him 30,000 Algerian dinars; for allegedly "offending public institutions" after a Facebook photo was posted showing him holding a placard opposing a fifth term in office for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

Hadj Ghermoul is an activist at the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LADDH) and a member of the National Committee for the Defence of the Rights of the Unemployed (CNDDC). He has been held in detention since the 27th of January 2019.

Slow Internet speed and interruption of the service

Protesters in Algeria complained about the low speed of the Internet and the irregular interruption of the service on the first of March 2019, blaming the Algerian government for the technical malfunction; stating that the government wanted to prevent them from demonstrating.

On its part, Internet-usage tracker NetBlocks said it is investigating reports on power outage and low Internet upload speeds, which prevents the posting of photos and videos on the Internet.