

IPI Launches Media Reform Initiative In The Arab World

BY JOHANN P. FRITZ

The Arab world tends to be a difficult place for independent journalists to operate. Taboo topics generally go unchallenged, including the role of Islam in society, the function of a monarchy, questions of national security and relations with neighboring nations. Self-censorship often amounts to self-preservation.

Of course, the legislative and social framework the media face vary considerably from country to country. Some figure prominently among the most repressive regimes in the world. Others are, comparatively speaking, highly progressive. Jordan, being one of the more progressive, was chosen as the location February 3-5 from which to launch IPI's campaign to promote "Media and Democracy in the Arab World."

Bringing together more than 130 journalists and freedom-of-expression advocates from 28 countries, we identified priorities in the region and developed strategies to promote independent and pluralistic media throughout the Arab world. A full report will be posted on IPI's website: www.freemedia.at.

While Jordan is one of the region's more liberal countries in terms of freedom of expression, its legal system still carries provisions threatening to that freedom. An initial objective in IPI's regional campaign is to focus on countries like Jordan to ensure that the legal conditions encourage the development of a free press. These progressive role-model countries can then set examples in the region and display the economic and social benefits of an unimpeded flow of information.

King Abdullah II reassured us that Jordan was willing to play this role in the region and that repressive laws would be systematically removed. The Minister for Information echoed the King's sentiments and expressed the hope that he will be the last Jordanian Minister of Information as the position amounts to a system of censorship, he said.

The devil, in these cases, lies in the details. With this in mind, we presented

the Jordanian authorities with a list of our most pressing concerns. We urged them to invoke the necessary legal procedures to make international treaties guaranteeing freedom of expression part of the domestic law of Jordan; to revoke the Press and Publications Law; to amend as necessary provisions in other laws that restrict the content of what may be published to bring them into line with international law, including the Penal Code, the State Security Law, the Law for Protecting State Secrets and Documents and the Contempt of Court Law; to stop the practice of pre-trial and other detentions for publishing and other forms of expression; to implement concrete measures to end extra-legal forms of harassment of journalists, and to facilitate the accreditation of foreign journalists.

Other concerns addressed included ending government control over Jordan Television and Radio; amending the Jordanian Television Law and allowing the establishment and licensing of commercial and community broadcasters; passing a freedom of information law providing for a general right of access to information held by public authorities; reviewing the policy for placing government advertisements in the press to ensure that newspapers are not discriminated against on the basis of their editorial policies; divesting itself of all shares in newspapers; amending the Jordan Press Association Law to end mandatory mem-



King Abdullah II agreed that Jordan would remove repressive media laws to set an example for other Arab Countries.

bership for journalists; and removing conditions on who may practice journalism.

The Jordanian authorities were receptive to these specifics and agreed to immediately initiate a program of reform. For our part, we have notified the Jordanian media and key officials that IPI will send a delegation to Amman in 100 days to evaluate the progress. We hope the end result will provide an excellent example of a progressive media scenario. 🌐



Johann P. Fritz is the director of the Vienna, Austria-based International Press Institute. He attended the recent conference on media and democracy in Amman, Jordan.