

Civic Space in Jordan: Securitised Governance and Stability Narratives

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Photo Source: Heba Alwahsh [via Pexels](https://www.pexels.com/photo/view-of-downtown-amman-jordanian-flags-hanging-from-buildings-above-a-busy-street-filled-with-cars-and-pedestrians/), May 29th, 2022.

Alt Text: View of downtown Amman with large Jordanian flags hanging from buildings above a busy street filled with cars and pedestrians.



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Abbreviations	Full terms
AI	Amnesty International
AP	Associated Press
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CDFJ	Centre for Defending Freedoms of Journalists
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIVICUS	CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
EU	European Union
GCHR	Geneva Centre for Human Rights
GID	General Intelligence Directorate
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICNL	International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JOSA	Jordan Open-Source Association
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and Other Identities
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NLO	Nato Liaison Office
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OSINT	Open-source Intelligence

PEGASUS	Spyware developed by NSO Group
PPC	Press and Publications Law Committee
RSF	Reporters Without Borders
VPN	Virtual Private Network

INTRODUCTION

Jordan is in a unique position in the **Middle East** region. Even though it is widely seen as a modernising state and an “island of stability” in a region full of conflict, its domestic policies draw a completely different picture (Polytechnique Insights, 2025). This narrative is created by the Jordanian state and its international partners to show **a moderate monarchy** that can keep the region safe. However, the reality is different, as domestic politics are fast-changing, people are unhappy, and the state has been using strict security measures to maintain control.

If we look under this geopolitical picture, we see that the **civic space** in Jordan is also becoming increasingly restricted, and this happens because the government invokes **security** concerns to control public life and limit **democratic freedoms** (CIVICUS, 2024). Because the political system is highly centralised, the monarch holds extensive executive powers, which means that policymaking is controlled from the top down. Consequently, civil society has a hard time participating in important decisions. The Parliament does not have much authority either, so public debate is also very limited. The government relies heavily on “stability narratives” to justify its actions. This means that leaders often use regional crises, economic problems, or other external threats as an excuse to make people accept more state control. Securitisation is also a big reason why authoritarian actions are “accepted”.

The state turns public problems into security threats to gain social approval and commitment from the people and by doing so, the regime manages to maintain its power without looking like a strict dictatorship. Moreover, the government is moving away from political liberalisation and relies on harsh laws, broad executive powers, and bypassing independent courts just to stop political dissent and social movements before they even start. As a result, the state does not get its stability from strong democratic institutions or the support of the public, instead, it forces order by trapping civil society by using very broad and vague legal tools. The most obvious examples are the new 2023 Cybercrime Law, the archaic 1954 Crime Prevention Law, and the strict 2008 Law on Associations.

This report aims to examine the constitutional and legal framework governing **civic spaces in Jordan**, with particular focus on the cybercrime law. The report will also explore the expanding securitisation in the region, economic protest, arrests of activists, online restrictions, increasing use of draconian laws, and repression of journalists, and the impact on human rights and civic space in Jordan. Next, the report will discuss how the government intensifies its control over information, uses narratives about national stability, and imposes more restrictions on the media. Finally, in the last chapter, the report draws focus on stability and security narratives, and how these narratives, together with international partnerships, indirectly impact Jordan’s securitisation practices.

1. CONSTITUTION AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

GOVERNING CIVIC SPACE

Jordan's 1952 Constitution formally guarantees several fundamental civil liberties. Articles 15 and 16, notably, explicitly protect the freedoms of opinion and the press, alongside the right to hold peaceful assemblies and establish societies and political parties. However, these guarantees are systematically undermined by constitutional caveats requiring that such rights must be exercised “within the limits of the law”, providing the state with a convenient mechanism to legally erode constitutional protections through restrictive domestic legislation (ICNL, 2025).

While Jordan has historically utilised a restrictive penal code, the most significant and alarming escalation in its securitised governance model is the enactment of the 2023 Cybercrime Law (Amnesty International, 2024). The new legislation replaced the previous 2015 law and established a comprehensive framework for digital authoritarianism. The most dangerous feature of the 2023 Cybercrime Law is its heavy reliance on overly broad, vaguely defined terminology that effectively criminalises legitimate forms of protected speech and political criticism. The new legislation introduced a sweeping expansion of criminal offences using deliberately vague and undefined terminology. The law explicitly criminalises broad concepts such as “spreading fake news”, “provoking strife”, “contempt for religions”, and “online assassination of personality (defamation)” (CIVICUS, 2024).

By deliberately failing to legally define the parameters of these “crimes”, the law grants public prosecutors and executive security authorities sweeping, unrestricted power to selectively prosecute political dissidents, human rights defenders, independent journalists, and ordinary citizens expressing their concerns about the economic or political situation. The law fundamentally alters the procedural landscape by expanding the powers of public prosecutors. Under the amended law, prosecutors are permitted to initiate criminal proceedings against individuals without requiring a personal complaint from a victim, provided the alleged online offence concerns a government entity, official body, or public servant (Amnesty International, 2024).

Penalties under the Cybercrime Law are deliberately punitive, designed not just to punish but also to financially ruin activists; a strategy that, equally, has a chilling effect on the whole society. Furthermore, the Cybercrime Law represents a highly aggressive attempt by the Jordanian state to enforce jurisdictional sovereignty over global digital spaces.

The law explicitly requires any social media company with more than 100,000 subscribers in Jordan to establish a physical office within the country's borders in order to respond to user account or content removal requests made by legal and administrative authorities (Freedom House, 2024). If the media companies do not comply with this regulation, they could face advertisement bans and gradual bandwidth restrictions. These regulations are designed to make media platforms extremely slow or completely unusable within Jordan's borders. This

legislative expansion of digital control is deeply intertwined with covert technological repression. The Cybercrime Law's attack on encryption and anonymity tools leaves citizens highly exposed to state-sponsored hacking. Extensive forensic investigations conducted by Amnesty International's Security Lab, Human Rights Watch, and the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project have revealed that at least 35 individuals in Jordan, including journalists, human rights lawyers, civil society leaders, and activists, were targeted with Pegasus spyware (CIVICUS, 2024). Pegasus is a highly sophisticated commercial surveillance tool that enables the complete, invisible extraction of all data, communications, and geographical locations from a target's mobile device (CIVICUS, 2024).

Moreover, marginalised communities bear a vastly disproportionate burden of this securitisation and digital surveillance. Jordanian authorities have systematically weaponised cyber surveillance and the new legal frameworks to target lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQIA+) rights activists (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Security agencies, such as the General Intelligence Directorate (GID), routinely summon activists for severe interrogations whenever content related to gender identity and sexuality is shared online or discussed in digital spaces. These systematic and targeted attacks on the queer community have forced several activists to shut down their organisations, discontinue their activities, and in some cases, flee the country (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Beyond the Cybercrime Law, the broader legislative framework heavily restricts press freedom and independent online expression. To control the domestic and international narrative surrounding the scale of protests and the severity of police response, the Jordanian state actively targets independent journalists, photographers, and documentary filmmakers who attempt to document police behaviour and public dissent. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has documented a sustained, highly aggressive pattern of harassment aimed particularly at freelance and independent journalists, who lack the institutional protection of major state-aligned media outlets and are therefore highly vulnerable to state coercion. For example, journalists covering the Palestine solidarity protests have been systematically arrested, interrogated, and intimidated to stop covering the protests (RSF, 2024). This oppressive climate creates an environment of profound self-censorship that prevents accurate, independent reporting on domestic unrest. Furthermore, in May 2024, the Jordanian Media Commission unilaterally blocked 12 local and foreign media websites under the vague, highly politicised pretext of "spreading media poison and attacking Jordan and its national symbols" (Amnesty International, 2025).

The structural suppression of civic space is significantly amplified by the broad scope afforded to emergency and counter-terrorism legislation. The 2006 Anti-Terrorism Law, amended in 2014, dramatically expanded the definition of terrorism to include non-violent acts that "disturb relations with a foreign state", or the use of information systems to spread ideas that "subject the kingdom to danger" (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

2. AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF EXPANDING SECURITISATION

Although civic space in Jordan did not close through a single decisive act, the gradual transformation became particularly visible by 2021. There was no defining law and no solitary arrest that marked the change abruptly. The shift was gradual, and for this reason, it was easy to overlook. For more than a decade, a succession of economic, political, social, and regional shocks was each treated by the authorities as a threat to the security of the state. Each crisis produced new security powers, and those powers tended to remain in force long after the moment that had justified them. By the early 2020s, the consequences were difficult to dispute. Protests, independent trade unions, journalism, and online expression were no longer regarded as ordinary features of public life. They had come to be managed as risks to be contained.

2.1 A Cumulative Process Rather than a Single Rupture

Securitisation describes the process by which a government reframes an ordinary political issue as a threat to national security, and in doing so frames exceptional measures, which would otherwise be rejected, as necessary. Takuro Kikkawa, a scholar of regime security in Jordan, argues that the monarchy has relied on this technique repeatedly. Trade unions, professional associations, and protest movements have been treated as security problems rather than as legitimate political actors (Kikkawa, 2025).

The practice is older than any of the developments examined below. It is also embedded in the legal framework. In November 2005, suicide bombings at three hotels in Amman killed approximately 60 people. Jordan adopted a Prevention of Terrorism Law the following year and broadened it in 2014. According to Human Rights Watch, the 2014 amendments defined terrorism so loosely that almost any act could fall within their scope, including conduct as vague as harming Jordan's relations with another state. The organisation noted that the law had already been used against individuals whose only offence was to criticise foreign governments (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Charges of this kind are heard by the State Security Court, a special tribunal that includes military judges and has tried civilians, journalists, and political activists. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a research institute that studies international affairs, warned at the time that Jordan was invoking the regional jihadist threat to justify domestic restrictions, and that measures of this sort, which secure stability in the short term, tend to undermine it over the longer term (Bishop, 2014). The legal instruments for treating dissent as a matter of security were therefore in place well before the events that later attracted international attention.

Economic grievance soon tested those instruments. On May 30th, 2018, the government announced tax increases tied to a loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the global lender that assists states in financial difficulty. Strikes and demonstrations spread across the country over several days. King Abdullah II responded by replacing Prime Minister Hani Mulki, a familiar method of releasing public pressure without altering the

underlying structure of power (Al Jazeera, 2018). These protests were driven mainly by wages and prices, and the security forces did not confront them with the severity later directed at other movements. They nonetheless revealed how far public patience had eroded, and they reinforced official anxiety about any large and independent mobilisation that fell outside state control.

2.2 The Crackdown on the Teachers' Syndicate

The decisive shift became clear in the state's confrontation with the Jordan Teachers' Syndicate, the body representing teachers in public schools. The syndicate was a comparatively recent creation. It had been established in 2011 after years of campaigning, yet it expanded quickly and came to represent more than 100,000 teachers. This made it the largest independent professional association in the country and one of the last organisations capable of mobilising substantial numbers of people without official sanction (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In September 2019, the association led a strike lasting roughly four weeks, the longest public sector strike in the country's history, and secured an agreement on higher pay. The success made the syndicate both powerful and conspicuous, which in turn made it a target.

The confrontation reached its peak in 2020. On July 25th, 2020, police raided the union's headquarters and its branch offices, closed them, and arrested all 13 members of its governing council. The public prosecutor ordered the syndicate suspended for two years, and a gag order prohibited any media coverage of the case (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Before the end of the year a court dissolved the council and sentenced its members to a year in prison on charges that included unlawful assembly and incitement to hatred. Human Rights Watch documented dozens of further arrests, recorded threats against teachers who continued to protest, and exposed an official circular instructing public employees not to take part in these demonstrations (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The episode had a dual effect. It eliminated the one large civic body that still operated beyond the government's direct control, narrowing the space for collective bargaining and organised dissent across society as a whole. It also served as a warning. If an association of this size could be dismantled over a dispute about salaries, then almost any independent group could be portrayed as a threat to public order. Aarti Narsee, a civic space researcher at the global civil society alliance, CIVICUS, observed that the legal basis for dissolving the syndicate was questionable and that the affair demonstrated the authorities' unwillingness to tolerate dissenting views (CIVICUS, 2021). From this point onward, independent organisations of almost any kind carried a measure of risk.

2.3 The Year 2021 and the Convergence of Crises

The year 2021 is frequently identified as a turning point, as several distinct crises arose within the same period, and the government addressed each of them as security threats. The most prominent one was a dispute within the royal family. On April 3rd, 2021, the authorities announced that they had foiled a plot to destabilise the country. They placed Prince Hamzah

bin Hussein, the half-brother of King Abdullah II and a former Crown Prince, under house arrest, and they detained around 18 other individuals, among them Bassem Awadallah, a former Head of the Royal Court.

On April 5th, 2021, Prince Hamzah issued two video messages denying his involvement with the plot to destabilise the kingdom. In the same video he criticised the restrictions placed on his movements and communication, essentially curtailing his freedoms (Warrick et al., 2021). He further described corruption and poor governance decisions over the past 20 years, indirectly accusing Abdullah's reign (al-Omaro and Satloff, 2021).

Later, on April 6th, 2021, Prosecutor General Hassan al-Abdallat barred all media outlets, as well as every social media platforms, from publishing anything connected to the case, citing the need to protect and preserve the confidentiality of the investigation (Qiblawi, 2021). Internet access was simultaneously disrupted in parts of Amman. In July, the State Security Court sentenced Awadallah and a second defendant to 15 years each for sedition and incitement, while Prince Hamzah was never formally charged (Husseini, 2021).

Confronted with a matter that a large part of the public wished to discuss, the government responded by suppressing the discussion entirely. It silenced the press, restricted social media, and cut internet access. The implication was unambiguous. Criticism touching the monarchy fell outside the bounds of acceptable debate, and whenever the authorities judged the stability of the state to be at issue, the public could be deprived of information. The royal crisis did not occur in isolation. March 2021 marked the tenth anniversary of the Arab Spring protests of 2011, and security forces dispersed the demonstrations that accompanied it, detaining protesters under emergency orders issued during the Covid-19 pandemic (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

During the same weeks, the government restricted two digital tools which activists had come to depend on. The first was Facebook Live, the feature allowing users to broadcast video as events occur, which had become an important means of documenting protests and the conduct of the police in real time. It was disrupted at moments of heightened tension (Freedom House, 2021). The second was Clubhouse, an audio application that had quickly developed into a rare forum for candid political discussion. Access to it was blocked from March 15th, 2021. The Jordan Open Source Association (JOSA), a local organisation working on digital rights, attributed the block to the internet service providers and found that several virtual private networks (VPNs), which people use to circumvent such restrictions, had also been disabled (Mahasneh, 2021).

Considered alongside the royal affair and the protest arrests, the consistency of the response is striking. Whether the difficulty took the form of a prince, a street demonstration or a mobile application, the remedy was identical. The flow of information was curtailed and dissent was contained, each in the name of stability. Securitisation had extended into the digital sphere, and the very instruments that citizens used to communicate and to keep a record had come to be regarded as threats.

2.4 Journalists, Self-Censorship and the Cybercrime Laws

Nowadays, pressure on the press is constant. Jordanian journalists operate under several laws that expose them to prosecution, and the most consequential of these concerns is expression online. The Electronic Crimes Law No. 27 of 2015 contained a loosely drafted provision, Article 11, which criminalised online defamation and insult and permitted imprisonment. Press freedom organisations report that this single article became the principal basis on which journalists were detained for their work (Freedom House, 2021).

The risk intensified sharply in 2023. The Cybercrime Law No. 17 of 2023 replaced the earlier statute and entered into force on September 12th, 2023. Parliament passed it rapidly and with minimal public consultation. The law introduced a series of broadly defined offences. It penalises what it terms fake news, character assassination, and any expression deemed to provoke strife or to be online defamation, undermine national unity, or threaten the peace of society. Sentences range from a minimum of three months in prison to three years, while fines can reach 20,000 Jordanian dinars (approximately \$28,000) (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

The law further requires major social media companies to maintain offices within the country and restricts the use of VPNs. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), a press freedom organisation based in New York, described the law as alarming and warned that journalists faced lengthy prison terms for their reporting (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2023).

The international response was unusually unified, and it connected the law directly to the broader contraction of civic space. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations body responsible for the protection of human rights, stated that its concerns were heightened by the growing harassment and arrest of activists within an already diminishing civic space, and observed that the law permitted the blocking of online content without adequate judicial oversight (OHCHR, 2023). Amnesty International, a global human rights organisation, subsequently found that within the first year, authorities had charged hundreds of people over their posts, including criticism of the government and expressions of solidarity with Palestinians. Aya Majzoub, a deputy regional director at Amnesty International, stated that the crackdown had narrowed an already limited space for dissent and had driven people towards self-censorship (Amnesty International, 2024a).

The protests over Gaza illustrate the extent to which this approach has become routine. After the war began on October 7th, 2023, some of the largest demonstrations in the region took place in Jordan, many of them held repeatedly outside the Israeli embassy in Amman. The protesters' opposition to Israel was consistent with the government's own declared position, yet the scale of the movement alarmed the authorities once it acquired independent momentum and began to touch upon the monarchy. Amnesty International reported that at

least 1,500 people were arrested in connection with the protests, and that some were held under the Crime Prevention Law of 1954, an older statute that permits provincial governors to detain individuals without trial (Amnesty International, 2024b). The same security logic evident in earlier years was now applied to a new movement, using instruments that had been constructed and tested in the intervening period.

These developments feed a quieter and less measurable phenomenon, namely self-censorship, which had taken hold well before 2023. The Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists (CDFJ), an Amman-based organisation that monitors press freedom, has for years asked journalists whether they restrain their reporting, and in several of its surveys more than 90 percent confirmed that they do. Its founder, Nidal Mansour, attributes this to a single underlying fear, that of legislation capable of imprisoning reporters. The same surveys found that most journalists had been summoned by the security services, and that such summonses had become so commonplace that many no longer regarded them as a warning (CDFJ, 2022). The effect is evident in what goes unreported. Major stories, including the teachers' union crisis, attracted almost no coverage in the domestic press.

2.5 What the International Monitors Show, and Where This Leads

By the end of 2021, the bodies whose function is to monitor these matters had reached a clear assessment. The most authoritative came from the CIVICUS Monitor. CIVICUS, amongst its functions, rates the state of civic space in countries across the world on a five-point scale ranging from open to closed. In its 2021 report it lowered Jordan's rating from "obstructed" to "repressed", the second worst category on the scale and the one reserved for states in which criticism of the authorities may result in harassment, arrest or imprisonment. The reasons it cited have already been highlighted in this report, namely the closure of the teachers' union, the internet shutdowns, and the restrictions imposed on journalists, civil society organisations and activists (CIVICUS, 2021). The downgrade was significant precisely because it did not rest on any single incident. It represented an assessment of the country's overall trajectory, and it confirmed that the pattern described in this section reflected reality rather than interpretation.

The remaining monitors reach the same conclusion. Freedom House, a U.S.-based organisation that assesses political rights and civil liberties worldwide, classifies Jordan as "Not Free" and recorded a further decline that it attributed in part to the 2023 Cybercrime Law (Freedom House, 2024). RSF ranks 180 countries annually, placing Jordan 147th in 2025. This represents a pronounced fall, sufficient to position the country within its most serious category, which RSF attributed largely to legislation directed against the press (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). These three organisations, each employing a different method, arrived at the same conclusion, making it difficult to attribute the decline in civic liberties to the peculiarities of any single approach.

Jordan confronts genuine security challenges. The country borders Syria and Iraq, hosts one of the largest refugee populations in the world, and has experienced real terrorist attacks.

These concerns are not fabricated, and certain measures adopted in response can be defended on their own terms. The criticism advanced by the organisations cited here is more specific. It is that the response has frequently exceeded what the threat required, that vaguely worded laws have been applied to penalise peaceful expression, and that the balance has shifted so far towards control that participation in ordinary civic life has itself come to be treated as a risk.

The developments described above did more than restrict civic space at the time they occurred. They normalised a set of instruments, including gag orders, internet shutdowns, and broadly worded speech offences, while establishing the legal and administrative structures required to deploy them as the State saw fit. By the time the government adopted a more deliberate and anticipatory approach to information management, the institutional and legal foundations for doing so were already firmly in place. The following chapter examines how that apparatus was subsequently put to use.

3. PRE-EMPTIVE INFORMATION GOVERNANCE AND INFORMATION CONTROL MECHANISMS

The securitisation of civic space in Jordan extends beyond legal restrictions and criminal prosecution. Recently, authorities have adopted measures of pre-emptive information governance aimed at shaping public discourse before dissent can materialise into collective movements. Through the use of gag orders, restrictions on digital platforms, and media coverage regulations, the state controls information flows while maintaining the narrative of preserving national security and political stability.

This approach has emerged alongside the expansion of restrictive legislation including the Cybercrime Law, Anti-Terrorism Law, and the Press and Publications Law. Combined, these legal instruments provide the institutional foundation where authorities can regulate public discourse and intervene in the circulation of information. Jordan's information governance therefore increasingly operates through preventive mechanisms designed to limit criticism. Moreover, the emphasis on national unity and security has served as justification for an expanding executive power to restrict Jordan's civic space.

3.1 The Prince Hamzah Affair and Intensification of Information Control

As discussed in section 2.3, the Prince Hamzah affair constituted one of the most serious political crises faced by the Hashemite monarchy in recent years. However, its significance for Jordan's information control framework lies less in the allegations themselves than in the authorities' management of information surrounding the affair.

Following this episode, Jordanian authorities framed the affair as a threat to the State's constitutional order and security.

The gag order to silence media reporting and social media users issued by Prosecutor General Hassan al-Abdallat demonstrated the government's willingness to restrict public discussion at the expense of rights and freedoms. By preventing independent reporting and limiting access to information, it essentially ensured that the official narrative was the only one circulating among the public (Freedom House, 2022). The gag order in this case thus highlights how restrictions on speech are easily employed and have intensified in recent years, and signals how no one is exempt from the hard line of national security. In essence, this has allowed the government to control oppositions and critics through rhetorical shifts that justify extraordinary measures against one's civic freedoms.

Media restriction in Jordan is not a new phenomenon, especially in cases considered sensitive to the royal family. However, the Prince Hamzah affair came at a tense time for Jordan after a severe economic blow dealt by the COVID-19 pandemic. Rising public dissatisfaction and a record unemployment rate fuelled discontent with the monarchy and government. The immediate aftermath of this affair was the strengthening of the security sector, including the shutting down of the chat platform, Clubhouse, to prevent the spread of online criticism (al-Omari and Satloff, 2021).

3.2 Gag Orders as Instruments of Information Control

One of the most visible measures of pre-emptive information governance in Jordan is the increasing use of gag orders. Gag orders restrict the freedom of speech and expression by limiting the ability of members of the public to engage in free and open discussions. Most cases are related to barring witnesses or participants from discussing trial materials and protecting the confidentiality of cases (Strickland, 2009). In these situations, gag orders must be under strict judicial scrutiny to ensure the restrictions to one's freedoms are absolutely necessary.

Despite the Constitution guaranteeing the freedom of opinion and expression under Article 15, state authorities have regulated these freedoms tightly under anti-terrorism laws, cybercrime laws, the press and publications law, and the penal code (GCHR, 2022). Article 39 of the Press and Publications Law of 1998 grants prosecutors the power to issue gag orders and media bans on ongoing investigations. The arbitrariness of Jordan's media laws and the criminalisation of criticism of the regime and defamation have already limited the independence of the media and the freedom of expression. Within this broader legal environment, gag orders continue to be an effective mechanism through which the Jordanian government can control the circulation of information and restrict public debate. In recent years, media blackouts have been imposed by the Prosecutor General in the aftermath of several politically sensitive events.

3.2.1 2020 Teachers' Syndicate

As discussed in Section 2.2, the crackdown by authorities signalled a fear that the protest would expand and catch wider attention, especially during a period where Jordan's economy

was struggling (Nusairat, 2021). Against this backdrop, the gag order served as a tool to limit criticism and public discussion surrounding the crackdown. Its use illustrates how restrictions on freedom of expression can accompany broader restrictions on freedom of association in politically sensitive cases.

Media restrictions were accompanied by the detention of journalists reporting on or supporting the Teachers' Syndicate (Zhang, 2020). Journalists who violated the gag order, such as Basel Okor, risked fines, while subsequent amendments to Article 225 of the Jordanian Penal Code introduced the possibility of imprisonment for violations of publication bans (Ersan, 2022). By restricting independent media coverage of the case, the gag order narrowed the range of information and competing narratives available to the public.

3.2.2 Other Recent Cases of Gag Orders

In October 2025, a massive altercation at the University of Jordan was met with a sweeping gag order preventing journalists from exploring reasons that sparked the violence. The prosecutor adopted the justification of safeguarding the investigation under Article 39 of the Press and Publications Law and Article 225 of the Penal Code (The Jordan Times, 2025).

According to The Arab Weekly, the campus brawl started with altercations between students from the Bani Sakher and Ajarmeh tribes, which turned violent (The Arab Weekly, 2025). Security authorities arrested over 50 students for their involvement pending investigation. A media blackout was enacted, banning all publication and circulation of videos and audio recordings with details about the incident.

Similarly, in April 2026, the Amman Prosecutor General also issued a gag order related to a viral video showing a woman insulting the Jordanian flag (Jordan News Agency, 2026). On June 2nd, another gag order was issued on the coverage of a shooting incident in the Ashrafieh area (Jordan News Agency, 2026).

The cumulative effect of the lack of transparency, accountability, and the violation of the freedom of expression due to the gag orders raises serious concerns. The increased use of gag orders contributes to an environment where journalists and media face uncertainties regarding the boundaries of reporting. The preventive logic of gag orders aligns closely with the broader securitisation dynamics of Jordan, where controlling the narrative becomes a matter of strategic importance.

3.3. Digital Governance, Stability Discourse and Self-Censorship

The evolution of Jordan's information control framework encompasses social media platforms and traditional sources. This process reflects the broader shift towards digital governance where the state seeks to monitor online activities while also controlling information to reinforce official narratives of security and stability.

As discussed in Section 2.4, the Cybercrime Law represents a key component of Jordan's approach to digital governance. From a securitisation perspective, the significance of its broadly defined restrictions on expression lies in the discretionary powers they afford the authorities (GCHR, 2025). Central to this process is the discourse of security and stability: restrictions on expression can therefore be presented not as limitations on fundamental rights, but as necessary safeguards designed to protect social cohesion and political stability. In this way, the regulation of digital expression contributes to narrowing the space for independent and critical discourse.

The evidence of widespread self-censorship discussed in Section 2.4 is significant from a securitisation perspective because it demonstrates how information control can operate beyond direct arrests, prosecutions or explicit bans. Self-censorship operates through the anticipation of possible repercussions: in an environment shaped by broadly defined legal provisions, recurring gag orders and restrictions on digital platforms, journalists and activists may avoid sensitive topics without being directly instructed to do so. Where journalists restrain themselves in this manner, the public can therefore be deprived of information before the State formally orders the removal or suppression of specific content. In this context, self-censorship can undermine journalistic independence and weaken public trust in the media (Vered, 2020).

From this perspective, self-censorship reduces the need for overt repression. The broader climate of uncertainty generated by legal ambiguity produces a chilling effect through which individuals regulate their own behaviour and internalise the boundaries of permissible expression. Information control can consequently operate both directly, through arrests, prosecutions, gag orders and platform restrictions, and indirectly, through the anticipation of such measures. Self-censorship therefore represents an important component of pre-emptive information governance: rather than responding to dissent only after it occurs, the broader regulatory environment can discourage certain forms of expression before they enter the public sphere.

4. INTERNATIONAL ECHOES OF STABILITY AND SECURITY NARRATIVES

4.1 Tolerance of Restrictive Practices

When the European Union (EU) and Jordan elevated their relationship to a strategic and comprehensive partnership in January 2025, the accompanying language stressed commitments to peace, security, democracy, and human rights across the Middle East and Mediterranean (European Commission, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and

Enlargement Negotiations, 2025). At the first EU-Jordan Summit in Amman in January 2026, leaders reaffirmed these commitments and pledged to deepen cooperation on freedom of expression, media association, and peaceful assembly (European External Action Service, 2026).

This rhetoric comes with the reality of long-standing patterns of non-implementation of the UN Human Rights Council recommendations. During the 2018 Universal Periodic Review, Jordan agreed to ensure that all domestic legislation complies with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), particularly in relation to the right to freedom of expression (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Jordan received 226 recommendations from other UN Member States, and announced shortly thereafter that it had accepted 131 of these recommendations, “noting” 74 others (MENA Rights Group, 2019). Jordan responded to the recommendations by stating that the country’s laws and practices already met international standards, despite evidence showing the contrary (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Since then, Jordanian authorities have failed to implement recommendations, taking limited steps to amend legislation or practice to protect free expression, which has caused continued deterioration of the shrinking civic space (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Despite the civic violations highlighted in this report, Jordan continues to enjoy special relationships with multiple Western states. The EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Kajsa Ollongren, described Jordan as an indispensable strategic partner and a vital pillar of stability during a press briefing on June 7th, 2026 (Petra News Agency, 2026). Ollongren stressed that Brussels holds its relationship with Jordan’s capital, Amman, in high regard, pointing to a robust, comprehensive partnership sustained by frequent high-level diplomacy and close alignment on security and displacement challenges, particularly on the fallout from the long-running Syrian conflict (Petra News Agency, 2026).

According to the U.S. State Department, Jordan’s stability and security are priorities for the U.S., which has provided Jordan with assistance since the late 1960s (Sharp, 2026). Over decades, American assistance has helped Jordan address serious vulnerabilities, both internal and external (Sharp, 2026). In general, the Jordanian economy relies on foreign aid, primarily from the US, secondly from the Gulf states and thirdly from the EU (Al Shalabi, 2024).

4.2 Jordan’s Role in Regional Stability

Jordan is a key country in the region despite being relatively small. Jordan’s strategic alliance with Western countries was established alongside the creation of the Jordanian State (Al-Smadi, 2024). Jordan, facing numerous internal and external threats, including several coup attempts, sought security guarantees through a close partnership with Western powers (Al-Smadi, 2024). Jordan’s location at the heart of the Levant, a subregion of West Asia along the Eastern Mediterranean, has made it a crucial actor in the Middle East (Med-Or Foundation, n.d.). The country also has proximity to major geopolitical hotspots such as Syria, Iraq, Israel, and Palestine (Al-Madi, 2025). This position has enabled Jordan to serve as a credible interlocutor for Western governments and a key pillar of regional stability

(Med-Or Foundation, n.d.). As a result, Jordan has become one of the US's most important regional partners, cooperating closely in a range of regional and international issues, including security, counterterrorism, and diplomatic initiatives (Med-Or Foundation, n.d.).

When it comes to refugees, Jordan remains one of the world's largest hosts of refugees per capita. As of mid-2025, over 586,600 refugees are registered with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Jordan (Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, 2025). The vast majority are Syrians, while many others come from Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia (Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, 2025). For decades, Jordan has been a major host country for refugees fleeing regional wars and crises, including the Palestinian displacement in 1948 and 1967 (Humanium, 2023). The refugee crisis escalated in 2011 with the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, which inflicted widespread violence on civilians. This led to the opening of Jordan's first large refugee camp, Za'atari, near the Syrian border (Humanium, 2023).

4.3 Intelligence and Counterterrorism Initiatives

The US-Jordan relationship is also reflected in the substantial economic and military assistance Jordan receives from the US. Jordan is among the largest recipients of US foreign aid (Sharp, 2026). Since 2024, the US has deployed up to 4,000 troops in the kingdom for military operations against Syria and Iraq (Sharp, 2026). Since the 9/11 attacks, Jordan has been involved in the fight against terrorism and is one of the leading countries in the global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (Med-Or Foundation, n.d.).

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and Jordan marked a milestone in their long-standing partnership with the opening of the NATO Liaison Office (NLO) in Amman, Jordan, on 16th September, 2025. Jordan-NATO coordinates in various areas, such as crisis management, counterterrorism and cybersecurity (The New Arab, 2024). The US designated Jordan as a major NATO ally in 1996 (The New Arab, 2024). It has provided Jordan with USD 31 billion in assistance since establishing diplomatic relations in 1949 and, in 2022, committed to providing USD 1.45 billion of aid annually until 2029 (The New Arab, 2024).

When NATO members took military action against Libya during the 2011 Arab Spring, Jordan was one of the few Arab states to participate in Operation Unified Protector, which was NATO allies' military operation in Libya (The New Arab, 2024). Additionally, Jordan's military and NATO forces have operated together on the ground in Afghanistan and Kosovo (The New Arab, 2024). According to Dr Hussein Ibish, a senior scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, opening a NATO liaison office in Amman shows how Jordan is absolutely crucial to the stability and security of the Middle East as a whole. He also reiterated that the liaison office serves as an invaluable hub for military and, most importantly, intelligence coordination (The New Arab, 2024).

In 2021, Jordan signed a defence agreement with the US that allows for the free entry of US forces, aircraft, and vehicles into the kingdom's territory for training and counter-terror operations. Since the October 2025 ceasefire and prisoner exchange between Israel and Hamas, the US has sought Jordanian support should Israel and Hamas advance to "phase two", a reference to the implementation of US President Trump's 20-point plan for post-conflict transition in Gaza (Sharp, 2026).

4.4 Regional Mediation

Jordan has positioned itself as a neutral space for regional diplomacy. For instance, during the 2019 diplomatic crisis between the Arab countries of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, and Qatar, Jordan maintained diplomatic ties with Qatar, even though the Arab quartet severed relations with the country (Med-Or Foundation, n.d.).

Jordan has often served as the mediator in regional conflicts, seeking to bring together opposing sides in diplomatic agreements to resolve disputes (Hennessy, 2025). Jordan has been known to play a constructive role in advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The country possesses a comparative advantage in regional mediation due to its longstanding diplomatic relationship with both parties (Hennessy, 2025). Jordan's military cooperation, extensive intelligence-sharing arrangements, and participation in international counterterrorism initiatives, including key regional coalitions, have enhanced its strategic importance to Western states. Jordan has maintained a Treaty of Peace with Israel since 1994 and has consistently advocated for a two-state solution, supporting the establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel (Hennessy, 2025). The country has also positioned itself as a defender of Palestinian statehood, with Jordanian officials warning that any Israeli annexation of Gaza or the West Bank could jeopardise the 1994 Peace Agreement (Motamedi, 2022).

Other than the Israel-Palestine conflict, Jordan has hosted talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran, particularly during periods of heightened tension following Saudi Arabia's accusations that Iran was providing support to the Houthi movement in Yemen (Motamedi, 2022). Jordan has facilitated discussions among competing factions in Libya and has historically sought to foster dialogue between Iran and Iraq as far back as the first Gulf War (Hennessy, 2025). Regardless of their individual success, these peacemaking efforts frame Jordan as a reasonable actor that can work with all sides in conflicts (Hennessy, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The **gradual erosion of civic space** in Jordan should be understood as the result of a deliberate and cumulative model of governance, in which the security narrative has gradually become a tool for **political repression**, rather than as a series of isolated abuses. The proposed analysis demonstrates a **consistent pattern** that has been repeated over recent decades: the Jordanian State extends its control over **freedom of expression, association, and information** whenever public pressure increases, whether through workers' mobilisation, online criticism, journalistic analysis, or protest actions. It can indeed be argued that the Jordanian government has gradually reinterpreted **civil life as a potential threat to the regime's security**, rather than merely regulating it.

The **normalisation** of these systematic acts of “**legal**” **repression** is the most significant aspect of this approach. Vague terms such as “fake news”, “incitement to discord”, “threat to national unity”, and “online defamation” can be used to criminalise freedom of expression under the 2023 Cybercrime Act, the previous Anti-Terrorism Act, the Crime Prevention Act and the Press and Publications Act. Such **ambiguity** offers the authorities considerable leeway to penalise the opposition whilst maintaining the **appearance of legality**, making it essential to the government’s strategy. Jordan has thus effectively moved towards an authoritarian system of government in which repression is more **systematic, administrative, and preventive** than openly exceptional and case-specific.

The consequences for human rights are severe. **Freedom of expression** has been undermined not only through arrests and prosecutions, but through the **cultivation of fear**. As well as silencing specific voices, these actions have had a broader **deterrent effect**, forcing other activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens to practise **self-censorship**.

The same pattern is evident in the restrictions on the freedom of **peaceful assembly and association**. As soon as collective action becomes independent, visible, or prolonged, it is swiftly curtailed through **arrests, gag orders, and administrative detention**. This clearly undermines the very possibility of meaningful participation in public life and erodes the foundations of **collective social pluralism**.

In general, **control over information** has also become a key mechanism of repression. Orders to impose media blackouts, internet shutdowns, restrictions on digital platforms, and pressure on online tools have made it easier for the State to prevent events from being reported outside official channels. This is significant because the control of information is not a neutral administrative act, but constitutes a direct interference with citizens’ **right to information** and the media’s ability to document abuses.

Additionally, **underprivileged groups are disproportionately affected** by these developments in terms of human rights. By making already vulnerable groups even less able to organise, communicate, or seek protection, the state exacerbates already-existing disparities. Practically speaking, this means that **civic space is not being reduced uniformly**; rather, it is being restricted first and most severely around people who are least protected and most likely to question official narratives.

However, the internal repression cannot be separated from the **broader political context** in which it is tolerated. Jordan, thanks in part to its strategic position, continues to benefit from strong international alliances centred on **stability, the fight against terrorism, and regional mediation**. Thus, by prioritising **short-term geopolitical expediency**, international and regional actors praise Jordan as a beacon of stability in a fragile and unstable region, thereby risking the reinforcement and perpetuation of precisely those structures that erode human rights daily in the domestic environment.

This contradiction is particularly problematic because it obscures the **long-term consequences of repression**. **Stability built on the silencing of dissent is fragile**. The Jordanian State may therefore be ensuring **short-term order at the expense of long-term**

legitimacy. The closure of civic space does not eliminate instability; it merely changes its form.

The evidence examined suggests that **securitisation** has increasingly become the **organising logic underpinning the governance of civic space** in Jordan. Through vague laws, punitive criminal proceedings, gag orders, surveillance, and direct control over the media landscape, the State has created a system in which **rights are conditional, not guaranteed**. Constitutional safeguards remain formally in force but their practical effectiveness has been significantly undermined by legal and political practice. This **gap between formal rights and lived reality** has become a central feature of the deterioration of civic space in Jordan.

In conclusion, Jordan's experience demonstrates how a state can maintain the **rhetoric of reform** whilst gradually stripping it of all substance. The cost of this process falls on journalists, activists, teachers, protesters, online users, and marginalised communities, whose ability to participate freely in public life has been curtailed by **fear and coercion**; more generally, this affects the lives of Jordanian citizens by fuelling a climate of fear day after day. Any reform, therefore, or commitment to reforming this type of governance, must begin with the **restoration of civil liberties**, the **repeal or substantial revision of vague and punitive laws**, and an end to **arbitrary publication bans and internet restrictions**. Above all, however, reforms and change must go hand in hand with a **genuine accountability** for the abuses committed in the name of stability.

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