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*The Cradle's Jordan correspondent*

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## Journalism under fire: Jailed for exposing Jordan

Freelance journalist Hiba Abu Taha was jailed for a year under Jordan's draconian Cybercrimes Law for exposing the government's covert trade with Israel, marking yet another instance of the kingdom's severe crackdown on dissenting voices.



(Photo Credit: The Cradle)

In Jordan, failing at self-censorship can land you in jail. Literally.

Freelance journalist Hiba Abu Taha, a passionate pro-resistance Jordanian of Palestinian origin, refused to self-censor. On 11 June, the Magistrate Court in Amman sentenced her to a harsh one-year prison term for violating the kingdom's controversial [Cybercrimes Law](#) introduced last year.

This was due to an article she wrote for Lebanese news site, [Annasher](#), criticizing "Jordan's role in defending the enemy entity." The article was published on 22 April, eight days after Jordanian, US, British, and French aircraft intercepted [Iranian drones and rockets](#) over Jordanian airspace heading towards Israeli targets.

However, Abu Taha was arrested on 13 May after *Annasher* published her investigative report on 28 April titled “[Partners in extermination: Jordanian capital owners involved in Gaza genocide](#).” The timing of her arrest gave the impression that she was detained for exposing Jordanian companies transporting exports to Israel – a land corridor that government officials went out of their way to publicly deny amid growing popular outrage at Amman’s continued ties with Tel Aviv while it commits the Gaza genocide.

It is widely believed that her nearly 2,000-word investigative report, supported by a 15-minute video of evidence she gathered undercover, was the real reason for the journalist’s indictment.

### **Exposing government deception on Israeli trade routes**

In her report, Abu Taha accused Prime Minister Bisher Khasawneh and other officials of concealing the use of Jordan as a land route for UAE and Bahraini exports via Saudi Arabia to Israel to break the Yemeni Ansarallah blockade in the Red and Arabian Seas.

She cites transport and clearance company employees in Amman and Aqaba about their services to transport goods through the northern Sheikh Hussein Bridge or the southern Wadi Araba crossing. She went on to expose the names of the Jordanian companies and their influential owners, who have shown no qualms about doing business as usual with the occupation state as it commits unprecedented war crimes in both Gaza and the West Bank.

Abu Taha also identifies influential company owners acting as agents for Israeli or Israel-bound shipping companies. Resorting to official documents, she writes that Jordanian exports to Israel increased from \$123 million in 2022 to \$143 million in 2023, with a record monthly high of \$17 million in December 2023, a month after Yemen began targeting Israeli-owned and Israel-bound cargo ships.

She notes that despite court evidence “recognizing the existence of the land bridge” as well as video footage and pictures of the movement of trucks at the Sheikh Hussein border crossing, Khasawneh insisted that:

**The land bridge is a figment of imagination with no truth on the ground ... The number of trucks entering and leaving Jordan for the entity has decreased, and what is being raised is nothing but self-flagellation.**

Abu Taha details her exchange with government spokesman Muhannad Mubaidin, who fires back at “those accusing Jordan” of providing a land bridge for Israel as “shameful.”

She writes that he “initially tried to deny the government’s role” in this regard and “even tried to point the finger at West Bank merchants as deceiving their colleagues in Jordan by telling them that the exports are for the Arabs.”

When confronted with the facts she found, Mubaidin immediately referred to the [1994 Wadi Araba peace treaty](#) with Israel and stressed that the government would not ban trade with the Zionist state because “such a decision is a populist one that appeases a certain party or faction.”

Meanwhile, Trade Ministry Spokesman Yanal Barmawi told Abu Taha that he was unaware of the “export issue” and that “the private sector would know.” She writes that official denials and blaming the private sector, which cannot operate without government approval, “confirms that the authorities are trying to contain the Jordanian street.”

### **Opinion prosecution**

Despite the rigor of her investigative report, Abu Taha was prosecuted for her 22 April opinion piece. Nidal Mansour, co-founder of the Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists (CDFJ), noted that Abu Taha was convicted under the restrictive Cybercrimes Law, which was enacted shortly before 7 October 2023.

The Media Commission, a government-controlled regulatory body, filed a complaint against her, accusing her of “inciting sedition and discord among members of the community,” “threatening community peace,” “inciting violence,” and “spreading false news” through electronic media.

Abu Taha’s article accused Jordan of “treason,” among other derogatory terms, for intercepting Iran’s retaliatory strikes against Israel and giving the US, British, and French military forces a free hand in the country to defend the occupation state.

The [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) (CPJ) quotes Media Commissioner Bashir al-Momani as saying that Abu Taha’s article contained “serious insults against Jordanian state institutions, incitement to the state’s positions, and stirring up discord among the components of the people,” which he added “necessitated her prosecution.”

According to a CDFJ statement, Abu Taha was convicted under Articles 15 and 17 of the 40-article [Cybercrime Law](#) of August 2023. Article 15 stipulates:

**Whoever intentionally sends, resends, or publishes data or information through an information network, information technology, information system, website, or social media platforms that includes fake news targeting the national security and community peace, or defames, slanders, or contempt [*sic*] any person shall be imprisoned for a period of not less than three months or a fine of not less than 5,000 dinars and no more than 20,000 dinars, or both penalties.**

Article 15 also gives the prosecutor the right to take legal action “without the need to file a complaint or claim a personal right if it is directed at one of the authorities in the state,

official bodies, or public administrations,” which means that Abu Taha could have still been punished even if the Media Commission had not filed a complaint.

The court also invoked Article 17 to hand her a one-year sentence. It states that:

**Whoever intentionally uses an information network, information technology, information system, website, or social media platform to spread what is likely to stir up racism or sedition, targets social peace, incites hatred, calls for or justifies violence, or insults religions, shall be punished by imprisonment from one to three years or a fine of no less than 5,000 dinars and no more than 20,000 dinars, or both penalties.**

### **Draconian laws and legal challenges**

Abu Taha’s opinion piece in *Annasher* undoubtedly lacked the self-censorship that Amman has successfully induced by imposing a series of restrictive press and media laws over the decades.

Mansour tells *The Cradle* that the press and publication laws have become more draconian with the evolution of information technology, beginning with restrictive laws on the independent weekly press back in the 1990s, to online news sites in the early 2000s, and social media with the most recent “fluid” Cybercrime Law that could effectively stifle any form of free speech on these platforms.

He notes that Abu Taha’s lawyer, Rami Odatallah, appointed by the leftist Jordanian Popular Unity Party (an offshoot of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), is more experienced in defending political activists than journalists.

Abu Taha is not a member of the political party. Still, it stood by her ordeal and [denounced her arrest](#) and sentencing, demanding her release and other activists that had been “harassed and arrested” for supporting the resistance against Israel online or on the street.

Mansour reveals that the CDFJ plans to hire a lawyer specialized in the Cybercrime Law to appeal her sentence, which his organization described as “[deeply concerning](#)” and called for “abolishing imprisonment in cases related to publication and freedom of expression in accordance with international human rights standards.”

### **Press freedom concerns**

Abu Taha’s arrest and sentencing drew attention to Jordan’s crackdown on both journalists and rightfully enraged activists by using the Cybercrime Law.

[Reporters Without Borders](#) (RSF) said in a statement that Abu Taha was: “the first journalist in Jordan to receive a prison sentence under the country’s draconian Cybercrime Law, which the RSF denounced prior to its adoption last year.”

Jonathan Dagher, head of RSF’s Middle East desk, said:

**A prison sentence for a journalist is a scandal in Jordan, one of the few countries in the region not to have reporters behind bars. This sentence constitutes a huge setback for press freedoms in the kingdom and threatens not only Hiba Abu Taha's safety but also the safety of all reporters. RSF already sounded the alarm about the dangers posed by the new cybercrime law. It must be repealed at once, and Hiba Abu Taha's conviction must be overturned.**

The RSF warned that “Jordan has seen a surge in harassment of journalists, including arrests, censorship, and intimidation since December 2023. Those targeted have included journalists covering demonstrations in support of Gaza or revealing information concerning relations between Jordan and Israel, and the harassment has been carried out under the Cybercrime Law in particular.”

### **Defense lawyer's perspective**

Defense Lawyer Hala Ahed says that no figures were available on the number of activists arrested under this law since the Israeli aggression on Gaza in October, but her office alone is dealing with 20 clients that she is defending pro bono.

She tells *The Cradle* that even if the authorities or courts release the defendants on bail after their detention, which often lasts up to a week behind bars, the mere existence of the Cybercrime Law acts as a deterrent and a legal intimidation tool aimed at stifling free speech and the right to protest.

Journalists say that the authorities seek to “make an example” of Abu Taha because the court turned down her lawyer's repeated request for her release on bail since her arrest and was quick to hand her a one-year prison sentence within one month.

The authorities, they add, want to send a clear message that anyone, journalist or otherwise, daring to publicly challenge the shameless US-allied official line that opposes the Iran-allied resistance will land in jail, be that through the Cybercrime Law or any other.

### **Previous arrest and defiance**

Abu Taha is no stranger to persecution. She was [arrested](#) after she was sentenced to a three-month prison term on 8 August last year, just a few days before the enforcement of the Cybercrime Law and months before Operation Al-Aqsa Flood was launched.

She was charged with “defaming an official body” for a Facebook post where she accused King Abdallah II of normalization with Israel and included an edited picture of the monarch with an Israeli flag during Israeli settler invasions of Al-Aqsa Mosque – which is supposed to be under Jordanian Hashemite guardianship like all Muslim and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem. Abu Taha was released a couple of days later upon appealing the sentence.

On 11 August 2023, she posted [a picture](#) of herself smiling with her eyes closed on her Facebook page, writing that she was “dreaming of a reality devoid of normalization with the enemy and without treason by the smallest to the most senior state official.”

She said that since the court “considered normalization with the Zionist entity an accusation, I demand the prosecution of all normalizers that head the Prime Ministry and rule the country instead of prosecuting me for rejecting and criticizing normalization with the historical enemy of the nation!”

The journalist added in the same post that “restrictions and jail cells do not intimidate us” and “we will continue to criticize and condemn normalization without exception.”

She closed her message with: “Enough oppression and brutality with the sword of martial law and release the detainees.”

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