**Lebanese Media – a Family Affair**

**Reporters without Borders and the Samir Kassir Foundation launch the Media Ownership Monitor in Lebanon**

**Often seen as the most liberal and free media environment in the Arab World, Lebanon’s media landscape appears tightly aligned with domestic and foreign powers vying for control. Key political groups but also wealthy family clans benefit from a weak or dysfunctional legal framework that reflects an overall laissez-faire attitude. Thus, they have managed to maintain and even extend their grip on pockets of public opinion throughout the dramatic events that have unfolded in and around this country in the last decades.**

**For the first time, the identity of these players, but also their underlying interests, structures, and connections are now visible after a comprehensive, data-journalistic investigation presented in Beirut today. Jointly conducted by Reporters without Borders and the Samir Kassir Foundation’s SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, the Media Ownership Monitor (MOM) – Lebanon is now available at** <http://lebanon.mom-rsf.org> **in Arabic and English.**

**Beirut, December 6, 2018 -** The seemingly buzzing Lebanese media market is, in fact, controlled by only a few highly politicized owners that are either directly affiliated with political parties or belong to Lebanese dynasties. Additional threats to media pluralism arise from clear editorial lines defined by politics, close ties among the dynasties, and a number of regulatory shortcomings.

“Lebanon’s political and sectarian diversity is widely reflected in the media. But it has also allowed regimes across the Middle East to interfere in its affairs in many ways, including by investing in its media sector. Since the financial crisis and the Arab Spring, this sector has been witnessing a drain of these funds for better or worse,” observed Ayman Mhanna, the Samir Kassir Foundation’s Executive Director. “What’s left is an overcrowded market that is neither sustainable nor independent.”

“Lebanon is a telling example,” added Olaf Steenfadt, RSF’s Global Project Director for MOM. “We can observe here that a lack of laws and law enforcement doesn’t necessarily mean more freedom. ‘Laissez-faire’ all too often serves those few who can afford to bypass rules and consolidate their power.”

**Concentrated markets in the hands of some eight families and three political parties**

MOM analyzed 37 outlets with the largest audience shares in Lebanon. The research revealed that the country’s media landscape is highly concentrated. The top four TV companies, LBCI SAL, Al Jadeed SAL, MTV SAL, and *Alubnianiya lil Ilam* (OTV), combine nearly 8 out of 10 viewers (78.1% of the audience). They are respectively owned by the Khayat, Daher-Saad, Aoun, and Gabriel Murr families. In the print sector, the top four companies, *Al Joumouhouria News Corp SAL*, *Annahar SAL*, *Akhbar Beirut SAL* and *Al Nahda SAL* (*Addiyar*), concentrate almost as much: 77.9% of the daily readership. Their respective main shareholders are the Michel Elias Murr, Hariri, and Tuéni Families, Ibrahim Al Amine, and Charles Ayoub. The radio sector is slightly less concentrated with the top four companies, *Société Moderne d’Information SAL* (VDL 93.3), *Liban Libre pour la Production et la Diffusion SAL* (RLL), *El Mada Group SARL* (*Sawt El Mada*), and *Société Nouvelle d’Information Audiovisuelle* (*VDL 100.5*) reaching 72% of the listenership. The top four respective shareholders are the Khazen Family, the Lebanese Forces, Elias Bou Saab, and the Phalange Party.

Combined with a deeply divided political landscape and a lack of proper means of regulation, these trends in audience concentration pose a high risk to media pluralism in Lebanon.

**Highest rate of political affiliation**

Compared with all 16 existing MOM country editions so far, Lebanon shows the highest rate of political affiliation with 29 outlets out of 37 (78.4%) being either directly owned by the state, current or former members of parliament or the executive, parliamentary candidates, or by political parties.

These politically affiliated outlets account for the entirety of the TV viewership, a print readership share of 93.5%, and a radio listenership share of 79.3%. Moreover, some of the most popular online news platforms belong to political parties, further amplifying the high risk of media politicization and polarization.

Lebanese law does not include provisions on conflicts of interests that could prevent government figures and members of parliament or their family members from owning shares in media organizations. Media owners are not obliged to disclose their political affiliations, for example towards the Commercial Register of the Ministry of Justice.

**“Political familism”**

Legal restrictions to limit ownership monopolies do exist in the broadcast sector (TV and radio), but the media sector overall remains very much a political families’ reserve. In the course of the research, the MOM team found at least 12 famous dynasties involved in the media sector. The Hariri family owns major shares in media outlets and is the only one to have stakes in all four media sectors (print and online, radio and TV). All outlets that they co-own combine at least 29.6% of the country’s print circulation (*Al Mustaqbal*, *The Daily Star* and *Annahar*), 7.7% of the radio audience (*Radio Orient*), and 7.8% of the TV audience (*Future TV*). Four other media owners are present in more than one media sector.

As a result, Lebanese media operate in a clan manner, based on family and political interests. At least 43% of the media outlets covered by MOM count at least one member of the following 12 families in their ownership or board – or both: Aoun, Daher-Saad, Eddé, Fares, Hariri, Khayat, Khazen, Mikati, Murr, Pharaon, Salam, and Tuéni. More than a third is directly owned by one of them. According to the MOM findings, most of the ownership schemes are designed to put the control of certain media outlets in one family’s hands.

**Transparency games and legal tricks**

Although transparency is officially required for any Lebanese media outlet registered as a company, most of the publicly available information was outdated. Moreover, existing legal provisions can be easily circumvented, which provides yet another evidence that law enforcement stops at the doorstep of powerful politicians. The MOM team found out that some media outlets operate outside the scope of the law, that a series of restrictions imposed by the Audiovisual Media Law of 1994 are ignored or clearly violated by some broadcast media owners, and that more than 60 political publications still have licenses although they have stopped printing and publishing years ago. In a context where most of the media owners covered by the MOM survey are politicians who serve or have served in government positions or in parliament, accountability becomes an illusion, as they are judge and party at the same time.

**Media Ownership Monitor**

Initiated by Reporters Without Borders and funded by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Media Ownership Monitor (MOM) is a global research and advocacy project to promote transparency and media pluralism worldwide. In Lebanon, it was conducted together with the Samir Kassir Foundation. Country studies have been published so far in Albania, Brazil, Colombia, Cambodia, Ghana, Mexico, Mongolia, Morocco, Peru, the Philippines, Serbia, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Tunisia, Turkey and Ukraine. All MOM results are available online at [www.mom-rsf.org.](https://www.dropbox.com/referrer_cleansing_redirect?hmac=TntzbFplXfQir2I4P6aHNZ5H9x4ETJa%252FBcx5%252FyJiOZw%253D&url=www.mom-rsf.org.)

The Samir Kassir Foundation is a Lebanese non-profit organization officially established in Beirut under registry number 30/A.D., founded on February 1, 2006. It is named after Samir Kassir, a Lebanese journalist assassinated in Beirut on June 2, 2005. It aims to spread democratic culture in Lebanon and the Arab world, encourage new talents in journalism, and build the movement for a cultural, democratic, and secular renewal. These are the conditions to lift the Arab populations out of their state of malaise, as described in Samir Kassir’s book *Being Arab*. The Foundation strives to defend freedom of media and culture through the SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom that it has been hosting since 2008. It has become the largest center to monitor violations against journalists and artists in the Arab Levant as well as a reference point for research on journalism and for training media professionals and enhancing their skills.

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