**PA court orders dozens of social media pages and news sites blocked**

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A Palestinian Authority court has ordered that dozens of social media pages and news sites be blocked, prompting fierce criticism from the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate and others.

The Ramallah Magistrate’s Court ruled last Thursday that 49 social media pages and news sites be blocked, an official in the PA Attorney General’s Office, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said on Tuesday.

“These sites are not registered with the Information Ministry as required by the law,” the official told The Times of Israel. “They are also publishing materials that threaten national security and public order.”

Many of the social media pages and news sites that the official said were blocked are highly critical of PA President Mahmoud Abbas and a number are either connected to or sympathetic to his rivals, the Hamas terror group and exiled Fatah member Mohammed Dahlan.

Part of the court decision, which was published on several Palestinian news sites, referred to Clause 39 of the PA’s controversial electronic crimes law.

That clause outlines a system by which authorities seek court permission to block websites that publish what is described as “expressions, numbers, pictures, videos, promotional materials or anything else that threatens national security and public order and morals.”

The official noted that 15 of the social media pages and news sites were not being blocked for the first time.

“Some of the sites were originally blocked two years ago,” he said. “The Attorney General’s Office asked to block those again because each order barring them only lasts six months.”

It was not clear whether authorities had blocked all of the pages and sites yet, nor if they would be able to implement the decision in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Palestinian internet users can get around restrictions on access to websites by using a virtual private network, which allows one to appear to live in a city abroad.

Several Palestinian news sites published what appeared to be a list of 59 pages and sites that the court ordered blocked. The official in the Attorney General’s Office said the list was not accurate, stating that the court ruled that only 49 pages and sites be blocked.

The PA government called on relevant authorities to walk back the decision to block the Facebook pages and news sites, government spokesman Ibrahim Milhem said in a statement late Monday carried by the official PA news site Wafa.

It also urged the administrators of social media pages and news sites to “follow professional and moral standards in publishing news and media items,” Milhem said.

PA Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh said in July that he affirmed to a delegation of Human Rights Watch officials his “government’s commitment to guarantee the right of Palestinian citizens to free speech through constructive criticism.”

The Palestinian Journalists Syndicate blasted the court’s ruling, calling it a “massacre of free speech and expression.”

The syndicate added that it would take legal measures to appeal the decision and its legitimacy.

In a statement, senior Hamas official Husam Badran said: “The new decision only means the Palestinian Authority and the occupation are standing together in waging war against written and photographed Palestinian works that have exposed the occupation’s violations, corruption and crimes.

“We call on the PA to stop its war against Palestinian journalism that has resisted the occupation,” he added.

Hani al-Masri, the head of Masarat, a Ramallah-based research institute, wrote on his Facebook page that blocking sites “is suppression and is indicative of stupidity.”