

## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

# Syria

Syria | [Freedom of the Press 2012](#) |

The unrest that swept the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 became especially violent in Syria. Antigovernment protests that erupted in the southern city of Daraa in March soon spread to other cities, even as the regime of President Bashar al-Assad clamped down brutally on the popular uprising. In December, the United Nations estimated that more than 5,000 people had died since the start of the protests. Journalists were also targeted and subjected to violent attacks, leading to a steep decline in what was already a highly repressive media environment.

Although Article 38 of Syria's constitution provides for freedoms of speech and of the press, these rights are severely restricted in practice. The 1963 State of Emergency allows the authorities to arrest journalists under vaguely defined charges of threatening "national security," which in effect nullifies the constitutional guarantees. The 2001 Press Law provides for broad state control over all print media and forbids reporting on topics that are deemed sensitive by the government, including content that could harm national security or national unity; it also forbids the publication of inaccurate information. Individuals found guilty of violating the Press Law face one to three years in prison and fines ranging from 500,000 to 1 million Syrian pounds (\$10,000 to \$20,000). The law stipulates that the prime minister grants licenses to journalists, which can be rejected for reasons concerning the public interest. Under Articles 9 and 10, the Ministry of Information must approve all foreign publications. The ministry also has the power to ban these publications if they are found to challenge national sovereignty and security or offend public morality.

In August 2011, al-Assad approved a new media law that purportedly upholds freedom of expression. It includes nominally positive provisions, such as the prohibition of a "monopoly on the media," acknowledgment of a "right to access information about public affairs," and a ban on "the arrest, questioning, or searching of journalists." However, it also contains several negative clauses, including language barring the media from publishing content that affects "national unity and national security" or that incites sectarian strife or "hate crimes." The law also forbids the publication of any information about the armed forces. It holds editors in chief, journalists, and spokespeople accountable for actions that constitute a violation of the law and imposes fines of up to 1 million Syrian pounds. In more general terms, Article 3 states that the law "upholds freedom of expression guaranteed in the Syrian constitution" and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but Article 4 says the media must "respect this freedom of expression" by "practicing it with awareness and responsibility." There is no clear definition of this phrase, leaving room for the law to be used to crack down on journalists.

The Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCMFE), a Damascus-based nongovernmental organization, reported that the Syrian government called for a "formal declaration of war on the media" during the 2011 protests. Evidence of such could be found in the Syrian authorities' continuous attempts to crush the fourth estate by forcibly restricting coverage

## 2012 SCORES

### PRESS STATUS

**Not Free**

### PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

**89**

### LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

**29**

### POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

**38**

### ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

**22**

of the unrest and misreporting events on state-run television stations. Propaganda and falsehoods are common on state-run outlets. In September, the Doha Centre for Media Freedom described widespread reports in the state media that called protest organizers “infiltrators” and “radicals.” These outlets also went to great lengths to denounce what they portrayed as false reporting in the foreign press about the situation in Syria. Meanwhile, due to the near-complete absence of media that were not linked to the government in some way—even prior to the protests—the only independent local source of information has been citizen journalists, who managed to provide foreign outlets with video recordings of protests and atrocities during the year. However, the authenticity of these recordings is difficult to determine, and they have been labeled “fake” by the regime.

International media are subjected to reporting restrictions, and most foreign journalists were banned and expelled from Syria in 2011. In March, the government revoked the press credentials of Khaled Yacoub Oweis, a Jordanian national and the head of the Reuters bureau in Damascus, because of “false and unprofessional coverage” of events in the country. Officials also expelled four of his colleagues. Al-Jazeera English reporter Dorothy Parvaz disappeared upon her arrival at the Damascus airport in April; after three days in a Syrian detention center, she was deported to Iran, and then returned to Qatar in mid-May. She later described hearing screams from other detainees being tortured at the Syrian facility.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), two journalists were killed in Syria in 2011. The mutilated body of Ferzat Jarban, a cameraman, was found in November, a day after he was arrested while filming an antigovernment demonstration in the town of Al-Qasir. Jarban was the first journalist killed in Syria in connection with his work since CPJ started keeping detailed records in 1992. Basel al-Sayed, a freelance videographer who was documenting clashes in Homs, was killed in December. He was shot in the head by security forces, according to local activists and relatives.

The SCMFE documented 114 other violations against media workers in Syria between March and October 2011. The figure included a number of arrests following the implementation of the new media law in August. Among those detained was freelance journalist Wael Yousef Abaza, who was held incommunicado in October. Amer Matar, a freelance journalist and contributor to the pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat*, was arrested in Damascus in September after covering protests. Freelance journalist Jihad Jamal was arrested at a Damascus café in October along with Sean McAllister, a British reporter working for Channel 4. McAllister, who was released after six days, said he last saw Jamal blindfolded and on his knees in an interrogation room in an unmarked building in central Damascus. Alaa al-Khodr, director of the official Syrian Arab News Agency in the eastern city of Deir al-Zour, was arrested in November, immediately after resigning from his post to protest the regime's human rights violations against civilians.

The government and the ruling Ba'ath Party own most newspaper publishing houses and heavily control the media. The Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance censor domestic and foreign news, and have banned all Kurdish-language publications. Though the government opened up space to allow privately owned print media in 2001, owners of most private outlets—including *Al-Watan*, *Al-Iqtisad*, and *Al-Khabar*—have close ties to the regime, meaning truly independent media are virtually nonexistent. While private outlets may be allowed to push boundaries on entertainment and culture, only the government controls and disseminates domestic and foreign political news and analysis, especially on television and FM radio. The few private television and radio stations do not cover news or political issues. Although the government does not preapprove content produced by private publications and television stations, they practice self-censorship to avoid being shut down or having their employees arrested. Satellite television is widely available.

Approximately 23 percent of Syrians accessed the internet in 2011. In late 2010, the government approved a draft internet law that would allow authorities to enter the offices of online journalists and bloggers, seize their materials, and prosecute them in criminal courts. In addition, the proposed law requires

journalists to submit their writing for review. The measure, which would significantly curtail freedom of expression on the internet, was expected to be adopted by the parliament in early 2012. Although the authorities unblocked access to the social-media sites Facebook and Twitter in February 2011, they continued their crackdown on protesters' use of social media and the internet to promote the antigovernment movement. The year also featured the emergence of the Syrian Electronic Army, which systematically hacked regime opponents' websites, blocked them, or flooded them with progovernment messages, all with the tacit approval of the Assad regime. In addition, proregime cyberactivists carried out the so-called Lovely Syria campaign on Twitter, filling the site with images of beautiful Syrian landscapes in an apparent effort to counter reports of daily massacres at the hands of the government. The campaign was finally taken down after regime opponents and other online activists pressed Twitter to remove it.

Although the draft internet law had not yet been enacted, the regime stepped up its harassment of bloggers during 2011. In February, blogger Taj al-Mallohi was sentenced to five years in prison for giving information to foreign states; the case was likely a reprisal for her blogging about social and political issues unrelated to the protests. Several other bloggers were arrested and detained for their writing on sensitive topics. The *New York Times* reported that security officials were taking a number of steps to restrict dissidents' use of the internet, demanding that they turn over their Facebook passwords and switching off the 3G mobile network to limit the uploading of videos to YouTube. The number of Syrian Facebook users had grown by 105 percent, to some 580,000, within four months after the government lifted its four-year ban in February. Several Syrian websites, such as the progovernment Syria News, prevented internet users from leaving comments on the popular uprisings in other Arab countries. Other sites allowed very moderate or vague comments on the uprisings while removing the more explicit remarks.

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