

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	243
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	Freedom House.
Titel:	Freedom of the Press 2011 – Syria.
Udgivet:	17. oktober 2011
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	3. november 2011

Title	Freedom of the Press 2011 - Syria
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	Syrian Arab Republic
Publication Date	17 October 2011
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom of the Press 2011 - Syria</i> , 17 October 2011, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4e9bec24c.html [accessed 1 November 2011]
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Freedom of the Press 2011 - Syria

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 29

Political Environment: 34

Economic Environment: 21

Total Score: 84

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 law is still in place, and it allows authorities to arrest journalists under ambiguous charges of threatening "national security," which in effect renders the constitution null. The 2001 Press Law allows for broad state control over all print media and forbids reporting on topics that are deemed sensitive by the government, such as issues of "national security" or "national unity," as well as 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 also 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 challenge "national sovereignty and security or offend public morality." In July 2010, for example, Syria closed down the bureau of the Italian news agency ANSA in Damascus following its attempt to cover the arrests of civil society representatives.

Both domestic and foreign journalists cover news by abiding by the "red lines," restrictions on coverage that include no criticism of the president, his family, or security services, and no discussion of issues such as the Kurdish minority or the minority Alawite sect, to which the president's family belongs and whose members dominate the government. Any criticism of the government can lead to lawsuits, fines, harassment, and dismissals. However, ambiguity remains about what is permissible to cover, causing widespread self-censorship among journalists.

Journalists face frequent harassment, including banishment from the country, neglected accreditation requests, and extralegal intimidation through arrest, detention, and torture. Ali al-Abdallah, a freelance journalist, was due for release on June 2010 after he was given a 30-month sentence for writing an article critical of a religious sect. However, a military court brought new charges against Abdallah in December, and he was still being held in prison at year's end. Two journalists, Bassam Ali and Suhaila Ismail, were also still in custody and will face military court trial for investigative reports they wrote on corruption in 2005 and 2006.

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. Television and radio broadcasting is, in general, controlled by the state, and the few private outlets that exist to do not cover news or political issues. Though the government opened up space to allow privately owned print media in 2001, owners of most private outlets have close ties to the regime, including outlets such as *Al-Watan*, *Al-Iqtisad*, and *Al-Khabar*. While they may be allowed to push boundaries on entertainment and culture, only the government controls and disseminates domestic and foreign political news and analysis, especially through TV networks and FM radio. Although the government does not pre-approve content that publications and television produce, these outlets continue to practice self-censorship for fear of being shut down or their employees being arrested. Satellite television is widely available.

Approximately 21 percent of Syrians accessed the internet in 2010. Critical journalists have increasingly used the medium to voice their dissent. However, the government has stepped up its online censorship and monitoring, as well as harassment of critical bloggers. For example, a 19-year-old blogger, Tal al-Mallohi, was detained throughout 2010 after being accused of spying for the U.S. Her blog included poems about Palestinian rights, though it is unclear if the arrest was in connection to the blog. Blogger Kamal Cheikhou ben Hussein was also arrested and detained during the year. By the end of 2010, around 200 websites were banned in Syria, including restricted access to the blog-hosting platform Blogger.com, the microblogging service Twitter, and the social networking site Facebook. Despite the ban, citizens are able to access these sites in internet cafes, but owners need to report the national ID number of the users and the sites they surf.

In 2005, the Press Law was amended to apply to electronic publications, requiring editors of electronic media to be at least 25 years old, Syrian nationals and current residents of Syria, and not employees of a foreign government. In late 2010, the Syrian government approved a new internet law that would allow authorities to enter offices of online journalists and bloggers, seize materials, and prosecute bloggers in a criminal court. In addition, the proposed law would require journalists to submit their writing for review. If the law passes the parliament, it would significantly curtail the freedom of expression the internet currently allows.

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