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Enemies of the Internet 2011 - Syria

Domain name: .sy

Population: 22,198,110

Internet users: 3,935,000

Average cost for a one-hour cybercafé connection: from 1 to 2 U.S. dollars

Average monthly salary: 200 U.S. dollars

Number of imprisoned netizens: 3

Controlled growth of the Internet

Although internet access has expanded considerably in the last decade, the infrastructure has shown little improvement, resulting in bottleneck problems, connection slowdowns and frequent outages. The very slow connection speed remains a key obstacle to Internet use. Most cybernauts are restricted to a speed of 56Kb, which severely limits downloads and makes it arduous to navigate the Web. In peak periods the speed is even slower. ADSL and 3G connections are still expensive. Nonetheless, the 3G network controlled by the Syriatel mobile telephone company – owned by Rami Makhoul, a cousin of the president – is experiencing strong growth.

Syrian Telecom has announced a plan to expand ADSL access within the country. A new 10-Gb broadband portal is said to have replaced the former international backbone portal. Yet in actuality, the technical improvement promised by the authorities has been slow to materialise. Some interpret this as a deliberate plan to keep the population off the Web.

Internet control is carried out by two government agencies, the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE) and the Syrian Information Organisation (SIO), which control bandwidth. The STE and SIO use Thundercache software to maintain a centralised control over the Web. The programme provides online website monitoring and filtering by spotting key “banned” words.

The Syrian government, which had long been minimising its Web presence, has completely reversed course, mainly due to Bashar al-Assad's influence. Websites promoting propaganda or official positions are proliferating, such as those of the Syrian News Agency (SANA), Syria News, Al-Gamal, Sada Suria and Sham Press, not to mention Presidentassad.net – all praising the Head of State. The President and the First Lady, Asma al-Assad, already had pages on Facebook even before the social network was unblocked again in the country, in February 2011. However, the President and First Lady Asma al-Assad, already had their own Facebook pages. In January 2011, the Presidential Palace's press service, finding it necessary to clarify the situation, explained that these were neither official pages nor official communication channels, but merely the result of individual initiatives by the president and the First Lady.

Specific content filtering

In December 2010, Syrian Minister of Telecommunications and Technology, Imad Sabouni, stated during a seminar held by Latakia University that censorship was not a solution and that it was more important to raise Internet users' awareness, while stressing the need for caution on social networks which can harm private lives. He also pointed out that Internet-blocking systems exist in all countries.

Nonetheless, censorship never abated in 2010. To date, 240 websites are blocked. The contents affected involved political criticism, religious matters, sites deemed "obscene," sites discussing the Kurd minority, and those based in Israel. Other sites targeted are those of the opposition parties, certain Lebanese newspapers and independent news sites. The website onemideast.org, launched in May 2010, was rendered inaccessible in the country. It provides Syrians and Israelis with a public forum on which they can discuss obstacles to peace between their two countries. Contributors from both countries have posted a list of the top twenty impediments.

The Syrian government justifies its actions by claiming that its aim is to prevent "denominational unrest" and any attempt at infiltration on the part of Israel.

Traditionally, censors have been particularly wary of social networks and blog platforms. Potential dissidents must be prevented, at any cost, from forming groups and recruiting additional members through the net media. Blogspot and Maktoob are blocked. YouTube has been inaccessible since August 2007, after videos were circulated which denounced the crackdown on the Kurd minority. Wikipedia's Arabic version was blocked from May 2008 to February 2009. Amazon and Skype are also censored.

Tunisian revolution in the censors' line of sight

In an interview granted to the *The Wall Street Journal* on 31 January 2010, Bashar al-Assad declared that "real reform is about knowing how to open up the society and how to start dialogue," explaining that decades of political and economic stagnation, leaders with no ideology, foreign interventions and wars have generated the agitation in the streets of Tunisia and Egypt.

At the same time, while the traditional Syrian media scarcely mentioned the fall of President Ben Ali's regime in compliance with orders from the authorities, the latter have tightened Web censorship, fearing that the Internet and social networks might promote social unrest.

For example, on 26 January 2011, the authorities blocked access to Nimbuzz and eBuddy – programmes which enable surfers to use chat functions, like those on Facebook, from a mobile telephone.

Several Syrian websites have also been preventing netizens from leaving comments on the popular uprising in Tunisia, such as Syria News, a pro-government website, while others have left a few very moderate or vague comments, removing the more explicit comments.

In February 2011, there was a wave of blogger arrests in connection with the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. In the morning of 20 February 2011, blogger **Ahmad Hadifa**, known by the blog name of **Ahmad Abu Al-Kheir**, was arrested in Baniyas by military security officials and released four days later. Hadifa, 28, a journalism student at the Falsam Al-Islam institute in Damascus, had used his [blog](#) to request support for the bloggers recently arrested in Syria and for the political prisoners incarcerated in Golan (a region occupied by Israel since 1967 and annexed since 1961). He had also posted demands for Syrian authorities and updates on the last few weeks of uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, and provided advice on how to circumvent Internet censorship.

In addition, a cybernaut was arrested for posting on YouTube a video of the 17 February 2011 demonstration in the Harika district of Damascus. During that protest, a young man was beaten by police. The video shows several hundred people shouting anti-police slogans, and Said Sammour, the Minister of the Interior, addressing the crowd.

However, the authorities reversed their tactics in February 2011, when they began to realise how ineffective their censorship system was. While popular revolts were at their height in the Arab world – undoubtedly having been stirred up by social networks – in February 2011, Syrian authorities decided to unblock access to Facebook and Twitter. This was a way for them to make concessions without jeopardising their position. Facebook was already very popular in the country, and netizens were using censorship circumvention tools to gain access to it.

Jailed for expressing themselves freely on the Internet

Syria continues to incarcerate netizens so as to make examples of them and to persuade others to practice self-censorship. To date, at least three cyberdissidents are behind bars.

On 6 May 2008, Syrian government security agents arrested writer and cyberdissident **Habib Saleh**. He was sentenced to three years in prison on 15 March 2009, by virtue of Article 285 of the Syrian Penal Code for “weakening national sentiment” after disseminating on the Internet of political articles calling for governmental reform, democracy and freedom of opinion. This is the third time that he has been tried under Bashar al-Assad’s regime.

Kamal Cheikhou ben Hussein a Kurd blogger and student at Damascus University’s Faculty of Literature and Human Sciences, was arrested on 23 June 2010 while attempting to enter Lebanon with his brother’s passport. There has been no news of him since then. Syrian authorities have forbidden this author of numerous publications on the All4syria website to leave the country. On 16 February 2011, he began a hunger strike to protest against his detention conditions in Adra prison. Held since 23 June 2010 under charges of “publishing information that could compromise the nation’s honour,” his trial is scheduled to begin on 7 March.

Journalist and writer **Ali Al-Abdallah** is still behind bars. Incarcerated since 17 December 2007 for having signed the Damascus Declaration, he was expected to be released on 16 June 2010, after serving a two-and-one-half year prison term, but the Syrian authorities decided to [charge](#) him with “spreading false information with the aim of harming the state” (Article 286 of the Syrian Penal Code) and “intending to harm Syria’s relations with a another state” (Article 276 of the Penal Code). These new charges followed the publication on the Internet, on 23 August 2008 – while he was in prison – of an article in which the journalist criticised Iran’s Wilayat al-Faqih doctrine (which gives the country’s clerics absolute power over political affairs). The Syrian Third Military Court in Damascus issued new counts of indictment against him which the Court of Appeals upheld on 1 December 2010. Ali Al-Abdallah now faces a possible new prison term. This new development is all the more troubling in that it shows how dangerous it is for journalists to criticise not only the regime, but also its allies.

The **Tal al-Mallouhi** case has caused great concern not only in Syria, but around the globe. This 19 year-old student – the youngest female blogger to be in custody anywhere in the world – was [arrested](#) by Syrian intelligence officers in late December 2009. Her computer and her personal effects were also seized. The fate of Palestinians was the main topic she discussed on her blog. After being detained in an unknown location for eleven months, she appeared before the Supreme State Security Court on 10 November 2010 and 17 January 2011. She was sentenced on 14 February 2010 to five years in prison for “divulging information to a foreign state,” namely the United States. Her sentence, typical of the brutality of the Syrian regime’s repression, is designed to intimidate Syrian bloggers by making Tal Al-Mallouhi a scapegoat.

Lastly, there has been no news of three other bloggers since their arrest: **Firaz Akram Mahmoud**, arbitrarily arrested in a cybercafé in Homs on 5 February 2011, **Ahmed Ben Farhan Al-Alawi**, arrested by security agents on 26 October 2010 and **Ahmed Ben Abdelhalim Aboush**, held since 20 July 2010. The latter had been incarcerated for six years until he was released under a presidential pardon on 2 November 2005.

Internet users are being watched

Since 2007, the authorities have been requiring website owners to retain personal data of the authors of articles and comments posted online.

Police raids on cybercafés are commonplace. Officers suggest to netizens caught doing “excessive surfing” that they “have a cup of coffee with them” – their expression for taking them in “for questioning.” Website managers must keep visitors’ personal data and a list of visited sites, and alert the authorities if they notice any illegal activities. Cybnauts even have to provide the name of their mothers and fathers.

Activist **Suhair Atassi**, leader of the “Jamal Atassi Forum” on Facebook, who has been calling for political reforms, civil rights guarantees and an end to the State of Emergency Law, has been subjected to multiple pressures and threats on the part of the authorities. Nonetheless, she has refused to dissolve her group.

Reporters Without Borders has learned of the death **Kareem Arbaji**, a blogger who was arrested by military intelligence in July 2007 for helping to run the online forum Akhawia and was sentenced to three years in jail by a state security court in Damascus in September 2009 on a charge of “publishing mendacious information liable to weaken the nation’s morale.” He was freed in January 2010, after representatives of the Christian church in Syria addressed a request to the president’s office for his early release on the grounds that his father was in very poor health. The authorities had been harassing him again for some time and he suffered a stroke on 5 March while in Lebanon. He was 31.

New law targets online freedom of expression

An Internet communications [bill](#) formulated by Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Otri, was approved by the cabinet in November 2010. Parliament is expected to vote on this bill soon.

The aim of this bill is clearly to further restrict the circulation of information on the Internet.[2] Two provisions are particularly disturbing. The first would allow the authorities to try journalists before criminal courts and impose harsh jail sentences. The second would allow any “judicial auxiliary” – an intentionally broad term – to conduct investigations on journalists suspected of committing “crimes” as defined by law, and to decide whether or not they should be arrested.

Ayman Abdel-Nourm, head of the All4syria.org website, which is blocked in Syria, told AFP that he thought this bill was “very harsh,” as it would notably allow “police to be dispatched to editorial offices to arrest journalists and seize their computers.”

The new bill is a reaction to the growth of new media in Syria over the last few years, which is deemed to be a threat to the regime. A dozen radio stations, as well as privately owned newspapers and magazines, have recently been created, headed by a new generation of journalists. One of them, *Forward Magazine*, also has a digital version featuring blogs and tweets on political and social topics. Some online journalists feel that they can express themselves more freely on the Web than on a paper version. This bill may convince them otherwise.

Emergence of online pressure groups

Many Internet users have mastered censorship circumvention tools. When the authorities start blocking the proxies most often used, others are created.

Facebook was blocked when the Syrians began making friends with Israelis, yet the social network, which is very popular in the country, hosts hundreds of groups with hundreds – if not thousands – of members devoted to tourism, business, sports, technology and entertainment.

Online pressure groups have formed to express their economic or social demands. One online campaign opposing a bill on amending the existing personal statute law seems to have played a crucial role in the government’s decision to abandon it, especially since privately owned radio stations had broadcasted online posts objecting to the legalisation of marriage for girls as young as 13.

Netizens from around the world [mobilised](#) on behalf of Tal al-Mallouhi. Egyptian bloggers massively rallied around her case.[3] International attention was probably also a contributing factor to her appearance before a court in November 2010, after she had been held in an unknown location for nearly eleven months.

In September 2010, a video showing teachers hitting their young students circulated around the Web after having been posted on Facebook. The Syrian cybernauts’ anger spread to the rest of the population, forcing the Syrian Minister of Education to ask the teachers involved to resign and to reassign them to office jobs.

A Facebook group was launched at the end of January 2011 to call for a peaceful Damascus sit-in “in front of the Egyptian embassy to express our condolences for Egyptian victims.” Syrian police dispersed a group of some fifty young people who had gathered on 29 January, carrying candles. Many Syrians left comments on Facebook such as “One day, I will have the courage to become Tunisian.”

Will Internet freedom foster innovation?

In June 2010, a delegation of representatives of U.S. high-tech companies – among them Microsoft, Dell and Cisco Systems – led by the State Department, met the Syrian President, officially to open a new market for U.S. technology exports and to promote freedom of expression online. American leaders seem to be banking on a more open form of the Internet in Syria and are dangling the prospect of millions of dollars of investments, insisting that U.S. companies cannot do business in such a closed environment and that a free Internet fosters innovation.

Although a few hopes had flourished with the growth of online media and their effort to push back the limits of censorship, the adoption of the law clearly shows that the authorities are continuing to do everything possible to block the Internet in order to prevent any discontent online from spreading offline. These early 2011 uprisings by Arab civil societies are bound to convince the regimes that they should maintain their current Internet strategy. Despite the fact that the Syrian government acts as though it were ready to give the international community guarantees that it will end its diplomatic isolation and attract foreign investors, it is ultimately unwilling to give up its control of the Web.