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Freedom of the Press 2010 - Syria

Status: Not Free**Legal Environment:** 29**Political Environment:** 33**Economic Environment:** 21**Total Score:** 83

- Although Article 38 of the constitution provides for freedoms of speech and the press, these rights are severely restricted in practice. 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 (US\$10,000 to US\$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 and has the power to ban them if they challenge "national sovereignty and security or offend public morality."
- The 1963 State of Emergency Law allows authorities to arrest journalists under ambiguous charges of threatening "national security." The law "prohibits acts of speech inciting sectarianism" and "false information" that is in opposition to the "goals of the revolution." Defamation remains a criminal offense.
- Criticism of the government can lead to lawsuits, fines, harassment, and dismissal. Several journalists were reportedly removed from their positions for this reason in 2009. Charges are often arbitrary, ambiguous, or simply not specified. In April 2009, Syrian Kurdish journalist Faruq Haji Mustafa, who wrote for the London-based daily *Al-Hayat* and the Lebanese daily *Al-Safir*, was arrested and held incommunicado; he was eventually released in June. In August, Ahmad Takrouni was dismissed as editor of a regional newspaper after it published an article claiming that regional identity was more important than national identity.
- Local media freedom advocates are routinely harassed. In September, authorities closed down the Damascus office of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression without providing a reason, although the organization still operates out of its French office.
- Despite the positive step of allowing privately owned print media in 2001, the government strictly controls the dissemination of information. The Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance routinely censor both domestic and foreign publications. Currently, all Kurdish-language publications are banned, though they are still available in some areas. In July, authorities closed down local offices of the Dubai-based Al-Mashriq satellite television channel, claiming that it filmed a Damascus market without permission. The government also halted the production of the television program *Alama Farika* and the weekly periodical *Al-Khabar* without sufficient reason, and prohibited the circulation of an October issue of the Lebanese daily *Al-Akhbar* due to an opinion article mentioning an improvement in Syrian-Saudi relations and noting a visit by the Saudi king.
- Journalists face frequent harassment, including banishment from the country, neglected accreditation requests, and extralegal intimidation through arrest, detention, and torture. In July, Palestinian journalist Helmi Musa, a writer covering Israel for *Al-Safir*, was detained for several days while participating in a political seminar in Damascus. In

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August, freelance journalist Ibrahim al-Jaban was arbitrarily banned from working at the television station Al-Suriya. In November, journalist Ma'an Aqel was arrested and held incommunicado through the end of the year.

- The government and the ruling Ba'ath Party own most newspaper publishing houses. There are a small number of periodicals affiliated with minor regime-aligned political parties, as well as privately owned newspapers like *Al-Watan*, *Al-Iqtissad*, and *Al-Khabar*.
- Nearly all of Syria's radio and television outlets are state owned, with a handful of private stations that do not broadcast news or report on political issues. These include Al-Medina radio and the television stations Ad-Dounia and Al-Rai. Satellite television is widely available.
- Approximately 18 percent of Syrians accessed the internet in 2009. 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. By year's end, roughly 241 sites were banned in Syria, including the blog-hosting platform Blogger.com, the microblogging service Twitter, and the social-networking site Facebook. In September, authorities discontinued access to the website of a Lebanese nongovernmental organization that covers press freedom. In 2005, the Press Law was reformed to crack down on electronic publications, requiring that editors of electronic media be at least 25 years old, Syrian nationals, and current residents of Syria, and that they not be employees of a foreign government. Proposed reforms introduced in 2009 would extend the Press Law's penalties, including jail sentences, to internet users. In September, blogger Karim Arbaji was charged with undermining national morale and received a three-year prison sentence.

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