

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	582
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom of the Press 2015 – Syria
Udgivet:	21. august 2015
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	17. september 2015



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Publisher [Freedom House](#)

Publication Date 21 August 2015

Cite as Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2015 - Syria*, 21 August 2015, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/55dad72f24.html> [accessed 7 September 2015]

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2015 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 90

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 29

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 38

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 23

As the civil war raged on, Syria remained one of the world's deadliest places to practice journalism in 2014. At least 17 journalists were killed and dozens more were injured, abducted, or imprisoned by the government of President Bashar al-Assad, various Syrian opposition factions, and the Islamic State (IS) militant group. The regime's loss of control in many parts of the country has resulted in the emergence of new media outlets and reduced censorship in some rebel-held territories, particularly in Kurdish regions that have declared autonomy from Damascus. However, IS brutally suppressed independent media and freedom of expression in the expanding area under its de facto rule.

Legal Environment

Article 38 of the Syrian constitution provides for freedoms of speech and of the press, while a 2011 media law prohibits a "monopoly on the media," guarantees the "right to access information about public affairs," and bans "the arrest, questioning, or searching of journalists." In practice, however, these protections are virtually nonexistent in government-held areas. The media law bars outlets from publishing content that affects "national unity and national security" or incites sectarian strife or "hate crimes," and forbids the publication of any information about the armed forces. It holds editors in chief, journalists, and spokespeople accountable for violations, and prescribes fines of up to 1 million Syrian pounds (\$6,600). Article 3 states that the law "upholds freedom of expression guaranteed in the Syrian constitution" and 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." The broad wording of this article gives the authorities leeway to crack down on independent outlets.

A National Media Council (NMC) was established under the new media law to regulate the information sector. Among other duties, it sets conditions for licenses, issues them to private media outlets, and specifies rules on funding. However, the NMC lacks independence, effectively

serving as a mouthpiece for the government's media policy and a vehicle for state propaganda. Although the law requires authorities to consult the NMC before detaining or arresting journalists, searching or seizing their equipment, or investigating their activities, this process is a mere formality. The NMC is the sole entity authorized to issue media credentials to journalists, and in March 2014 it began to crack down on outlets that provided press cards and other professional identification to journalists without going through official channels. The NMC maintains a stringent registration and licensing regime and closely monitors outlets to ensure compliance. After setting advertising limits that threatened to strain economic support for independent outlets in 2013, the NMC proposed to reduce application and licensing fees in April 2014, a reform that the Ministry of Finance approved in September.

In addition to media laws, the government has used security-related legislation to control and punish journalists. Mazen Darwish, president of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), was arrested in 2012 and tried in March 2014 alongside four SCM colleagues for allegedly "publicizing terrorist acts," an offense outlined in a 2012 antiterrorism law. The case was postponed repeatedly, and a verdict was still pending at the end of 2014. Meanwhile, Darwish and his associates remained in detention under harsh conditions, and faced up to 15 years in prison if convicted. Separately, Louay Hussein, a veteran journalist and leader of a partly tolerated opposition movement, was arrested in November 2014 for "reporting false news" and undermining the national spirit after he published an article in the pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat* that criticized the Syrian government. He remained in detention through the end of 2014, and the status of his case was unclear.

The legal environment for the media in territories outside the government's influence varies depending on the group in control. In 2014, IS gained control over large parts of the country's north and east and began to systematically enforce its own legal regime, including provisions pertaining to the media. In October, observers obtained a list of 11 restrictions issued by the IS press office, such as a rule requiring journalists to swear loyalty to the group's self-declared caliphate and submit most of their work to official censorship bodies. There were reports that month that IS had instructed its fighters to execute any journalists who produced negative coverage of the group's activities. Areas under IS control have been described as news "black holes" in which repression is so severe that the news media are unable to function as such.

Legal conditions are somewhat more permissive in Syrian Kurdistan, known locally as Rojava, or Western Kurdistan, where local Kurdish leaders and militias have established functional autonomy during the civil war. In January 2014, Rojava formally declared local autonomy and established its own constitution, which includes protections for the media and freedom of expression. Article 24 affirms "the right to freedom of opinion and expression; including freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media." However, the same article also provides that such freedoms may be curtailed to ensure the "security of the autonomous regions, public safety and order, the integrity of the individual," and other interests, seemingly opening the door to restrictive laws on issues like sedition and libel.

Other elements of Rojava's media regime are also problematic. In August 2013, the authorities established the Union of Free Media (YRA), a government body with numerous press-related functions that continued to operate after autonomy was declared. All news media in the Kurdish cantons must obtain permits from the YRA in order to function legally. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), the dominant Kurdish political party in Rojava, has reportedly pursued lawsuits against figures with ties to opposition groups, including journalists, for allegedly "attacking the achievements of the people in Western Kurdistan and spreading lies." However, despite such internecine disputes, a variety of print and broadcast outlets are allowed to operate, including those that are critical of the ruling party. The YRA also provides training and support to journalists operating in Rojava.

Political Environment

Authorities in government-held areas continued to forcibly restrict news coverage during 2014. False statements and propaganda are common on state-run outlets, and all media are subject to official censorship. The General Corporation for the Distribution of Publications is responsible for prior censorship and distribution of all printed materials in Syria. It regularly excises controversial content prior to circulation and fully blocks distribution of certain publications, a long-standing practice that has intensified with the conflict. Visas for the foreign press are restricted; journalists from allied countries, such as Russia and Iran, have almost uninhibited access, while those from democratic states are often arbitrarily denied or issued extremely short or limited permits. All journalists are subject to onerous restrictions on their movements and activities, but they are sometimes able to flout these strictures given the chaotic security situation, which weakens the government's ability to police the media.

The loss of government control over parts of the country has led to a proliferation of new media outlets, including an estimated 500 print publications based in rebel-held territories. Most are small and primarily serve local audiences. A coalition of local activists and foreign donor organizations has helped to organize a grassroots network of several television and radio stations, a dozen newspapers, and several dozen media offices across opposition-controlled Syria. However, critical media working in regime-held territory do so at great risk, and thus circulate their materials primarily underground or online. In government zones, the use of cameras in the street, including mobile-phone cameras, is grounds for arrest. Despite these risks, citizen journalists help to fill the gap created by restrictions on mainstream media and have played an integral role in documenting protests and atrocities. Citizen journalists tend to work in decentralized "media centers" based in residential spaces, using simple equipment that is often funded by outside actors, such as Syrian expatriates and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

The government regularly uses violence and arbitrary detentions to punish dissent and critical reporting. By the end of 2014, at least 12 journalists were in government custody; at least six were being held without charge, and some had been in detention for years. While some three-quarters of the journalists killed in Syria during 2014 died while covering the fighting, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, several were deliberately targeted for their work. Government troops are believed to have purposefully destroyed a news van in a missile strike in Daraa Province in December, killing three employees of the opposition television station Orient News.

IS also employed a combination of propaganda, censorship, arbitrary detention, and violence to control the media environment in its territory. In June, the group distributed a feature-length movie online to promote its ideology and recruit new supporters. It also began producing a multilingual magazine, *Dabiq*, based in its de facto capital, Raqqa. By late 2014, IS had taken over two television stations in the city that were previously controlled by local broadcasters, and began disseminating its propaganda over the airwaves. The group also achieved notoriety for its sophisticated use of social media, which included an active Twitter and Facebook presence and even a smartphone application.

IS was thought to be holding multiple journalists in Syria, and it murdered at least three of the captives during 2014. Al-Moutaz Bellah Ibrahim, a correspondent for the independent Shaam News Network who had reported critically on IS activity in Raqqa, was kidnapped by the group in March and killed just north of the city in May. In August and September, IS released two videos of the beheadings of American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff. Other captive foreign journalists were used as props in IS propaganda videos. In a widely disseminated video in September, British journalist John Cantlie – under apparent duress – denounced U.S. and British policies in the Middle East.

In Rojava, where independent and Kurdish-language media were banned prior to the civil war, many new local outlets have been established in recent years, and foreign media are allowed to enter and operate with fewer restrictions than in the rest of Syria. However, the local Kurdish media are highly politicized. Most outlets, and all television stations, are affiliated with political parties and are often critical of their partisan rivals. The main division is between the PYD and its supporters on the one hand, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) – the largest party in Iraqi Kurdistan – and its affiliates on the other.

This rivalry has led to the harassment of some Kurdish opposition journalists in Rojava. In May, Reporters Without Borders released a report documenting arrests, interrogations, and threats directed against numerous journalists, most of them affiliated with the Iraqi Kurdish television stations Rudaw and Zagros TV. Physical assaults by security forces and threats of expulsion from the territory were also reported. However, detentions were short in duration, and no journalists reportedly remained in custody at year's end. In February, local authorities ordered the independent Arta FM radio station to suspend news coverage and broadcast only music, with no official explanation. The station halted all broadcasting in protest, and the order was rescinded under international pressure, allowing the station to resume its news programming the next day.

Economic Environment

In regime-held territory, the government and allied businessmen own most newspaper-publishing houses and tightly control editorial policy. Although the government opened up space for private print media in 2001, the owners of most private outlets – including *Al-Watan*, *Al-Iqtisad*, and *Al-Khabar* – have close ties to the regime. As a result, genuinely independent print media are virtually nonexistent. All television channels are state owned, and the government directly controls all programming and content. New print and broadcast outlets have emerged in opposition-controlled territory, but their financing – which relies on Syrian expatriates and international NGOs – hinders viability, and staff are mostly volunteers. Syria's war-ravaged economy is not conducive to sustaining private outlets, and the overall economic situation grew worse in 2014.

Rojava is home to a number of local media outlets, including Ronahi TV, Arta FM, the bimonthly newspaper *Nudem*, the news agency Hawar News, and the website Welati. However, these too suffer from economic woes, relying on volunteers and subsidies from local and foreign Kurdish benefactors. Even foreign television stations operating in the territory, such as Kurdish outlets from northern Iraq, are economically dependent on affiliated political parties.

Approximately 28 percent of Syrians accessed the internet in 2014, and social-media websites and communication tools such as Skype are increasingly used to transmit news. War-related damage to infrastructure and deliberate interference by combatants cause frequent power outages and disruption of telecommunications. Opposition groups have begun to circumvent these problems by using satellite devices to access the internet and telephone service.

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