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Enemies of the Internet 2012

Bashar Al-Assad's regime responded with violence when Syrians, inspired by the mass uprisings in the Arab world, took to the streets in March 2011 to demand democratic change. In the weeks that followed, the regime stepped up control of the means of communication and surveillance of dissidents. With the help of its cyber-army, it engaged in a battle of disinformation. Syria's netizens, the only witnesses still present in the worst-hit areas, continue heroically to risk their lives to inform the world. Like Syrian and foreign journalists, these unwanted witnesses are now seen as enemies of the state.

Syria was already known for its censorship of the Internet before the start of the Syrian revolution ([read the Syria chapter in the 2011 Enemies of the Internet report](#)). In response to the protests, a violent crackdown in the streets was accompanied by unrelenting online repression.

Citizens and netizens combat the news blackout

Outraged by the regime's reaction, bloggers and netizens took it upon themselves to provide news and information once the foreign media has been expelled shortly after the start of the uprising. As the death toll mounted, ordinary citizens got involved, becoming activists and journalists at the same time, documenting what was happening as journalists would have done, but from the perspective of those who are clearly committed. Already seen during the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, this trend is much more pronounced in Syria. Activism and reporting have become one.

Simultaneously citizens, activists and reporters, they use their imagination to get the information out. Video is filmed with mobile phones and sent straight to video-streaming websites. Or it is filmed with video cameras and the video files are copied on to USB flash drives and passed from hand to hand until they can finally be posted online. Much use is made of Skype and Mumble. Syrians who live the near border use Lebanese or Turkish servers to access the Internet or mobile phone networks and thereby escape surveillance.

As the regime reinforces its censorship, the media center created by local coordination committees has formed a network of contributors throughout the country to help disseminate information. They have managed to post videos directly on YouTube, above all via [LCCSyria TV](#), and have helped to transmit content to foreign media. Other networks such as Sham News Network and Avaaz have contributed to circulate information.

Members of the Syrian diaspora play a key role in relaying information to journalists and politicians in the countries where they live. Human rights activists throughout the world have also joined this chain of international solidarity. Participative initiatives such as [Syria Tracker](#) are trying to document the crimes being committed in Syria.

"Hactivists" have helped to get video footage out of Syria. Telecomix, for example, executed a major operation called [#OpSyria](#) on the night of 4 September to help Syrians to dodge the government's censorship. It succeeded in diverting all Syrian Internet traffic to a special page with advice on circumventing censorship, including how to

install the Tor software and use a secured https connection. More and more people have since then connected to the Telecomix channel using the protected instant messaging system IRC and have been given help with circulating videos, photos and eye-witness accounts.

Indiscriminate violence against population and news sources

[The toll from the repression since March 2011 is damning](#). Amnesty International cites the figures provided by the London-based Strategic Research and Communication Centre, which specializes in following Syria. According to the centre, the toll on 4 March 2012 stood at 10,207 dead (including 710 children), 65,000 disappeared and more than 212,000 arrests.

At least seven journalists had been killed in connection with their work in Syria by the end of February 2012. Netizens have also paid with their lives for disseminating information. Citizen journalist [Basil Al-Sayed](#) was killed in Homs on 29 December while filming a bloodbath in the district of Baba Amr. He had been filming demonstrations and the brutal crackdowns by the security forces since the start of the uprising ([watch his last video](#)). Photographer and video-reporter **Ferzat Jarban** was murdered on 20 November after being arrested in Homs. **Soleiman Saleh Abazaid**, who ran the "Liberated people of Horan" Facebook page, was killed by a shot to the head in July. Writer and activist [Hussein Issou](#)'s fate is not known but the worst is feared.

Many Syrian journalists and bloggers have been arrested or kidnapped and many have been tortured while detained. A total of 16 people – employees and visitors – were arrested during a [raid](#) on the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression in Damascus at midday on 16 February. The centre's director, **Mazen Darwish**, was one of those arrested. The others were **Yara Badr**, **Razan Ghazzawi**, **Hanadi Zahlout**, **Hussein Greir**, **Hani Z'itani**, **Sana Z'itani**, **Rita Dayoub**, **Joan Farso**, **Bassam Al-Ahmad**, **Mayada Al-Khalil**, **Maha Al-Assablani**, **Mansour Hamid**, **Abdelrahman Hamadah**, **Ayham Ghazzoul** and **Shady Yazbek**. The women were released two days later but were told to report daily to intelligence services while an investigation continues. Nine men are still detained. The raid was condemned by four UN experts.

Ahmed Hadifa, a 28-year old blogger better known by the blog name of [Ahmad Abu Al-Kheir](#), was arrested in Damascus on 24 March 2011 "because of his activities on Facebook in support of the protests in Deraa" and was held for three weeks. It was his second arrest.

The many others who have been arrested include cyber-activists Alaa Shueiti and **Qais Abatili**, and the Kurdish activist **Shabal Ibrahim**. **Anas Al-Ma'arawi**, a journalist, blogger and founder of the first Arab website to specialize in the Android system, was arrested in a Damascus suburb on 1 July and was held for two months. [Mohamed Ghazi Kannass](#), a journalist who was active on Facebook and kept his own blog called [Kalemah Insan](#) ("A man's word"), was arrested in Damascus in January 2012. **Jehad Jamal**, a blogger known as "Milan," was [arrested](#) in October and was released at the end of December while the Arab League observers were in Syria. The blogger **Othman Mohamed Issa** was [arrested](#) at his Damascus home on 21 November.

Filmmaker and cyber-activist **Firas Fayyad** was arrested on 1 December at Damascus airport on charges of spreading false information and belonging to an opposition movement. He was finally released in February. ([See a partial list of bloggers held on 14 January](#).)

Student and blogger **Tal Al-Mallouhi** has been detained since December 2009. She was brought before a state security court in Damascus for the second time on 17 January 2011. Reportedly accused of spying for the United States, she is being held in Duma prison, near Damascus. [Internet users all over the world have called for her release](#).

Reporters Without Borders knows of dozens of Syrians who have been arrested and tortured after giving interviews to foreign media about the repression in their country. Others have been arrested for working for journalists. The Syrian security agencies make every effort to identify those who help foreign reporters or talk to them. Reporters Without Borders has urged the international media to use the utmost prudence in their contacts with Syrians.

Disrupting communications

At the start of June 2011, the government temporarily imposed an almost complete stop on the Internet. It was subsequently lifted but Internet connections are now slowed right down regularly, almost every Friday, when the big weekly protests are staged. This is especially so in areas that are opposition strongholds. The aim is to prevent people from sending and receiving video footage of demonstrations and the ensuing violent response from the security forces. There have been reports of the Internet and mobile phone communication being disconnected in Homs at the height of the offensive against the district of Baba Amr.

In an attempt to limit the size of the protests and the transmission of photos and videos, the authorities often temporarily suspend Internet and mobile phone services in the localities where protests are taking place. News media and NGOs have responded by distributing satellite phones in cities that are often targeted by such cuts or are hard to access. Risks of geolocalization are involved. Border checks have been stepped up and it is now very difficult to bring such hi-tech equipment into the country. Charging batteries is also a problem. The authorities often cut power supplies to restrict the dissemination of information.

Access to Bambuser, a Swedish website that allows users to post video footage shot with a mobile phone, has been blocked in Syria since 16 February. Confirming this on 17 February, the head of the site said “dictators don’t like Bambuser” and that the Assad regime regarded it as a “serious threat.” The Syrian opposition has been using Bambuser to circulate video footage of the government’s brutal repression. Video of the bombardment of Homs that had been posted on Bambuser was recently broadcast by leading international TV stations. Bambuser was blocked in Egypt in January 2011 and is still blocked in Bahrain.

Surveillance and propaganda

The government’s cyber-army, which tracks dissidents on online social networks, seems to have stepped up its activities since June. Web pages that support the demonstrations were flooded with pro-Assad messages. To [disrupt information on the #Syria hashtag](#), Twitter accounts were created to send hundreds of tweets with keywords that switched the reader to sports results or tourist photos of Syria. And to discredit the uprising, messages calling for violence were posted on the pages of government opponents to give the impression that they were the authors.

The cyber-army claimed its efforts were designed to make up for the shortcomings of the official media and to wage an information war targeted at Syrians both at home and abroad.

In order to better monitor dissidents, the authorities used phishing and “man-in-the-middle” methods to obtain their personal data. The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) [warned Syrian Facebook users](#) on 5 May that fake security certificates planted by Syria’s telecommunications ministry were being used to trick them into providing their personal data and thereby allowing their communications can be monitored. The fake security certificates caused warnings to pop up in browsers, but people tended to ignore them. The EFF urged Syrian users to use proxy connections to access Facebook, or to login via Tor. The EFF subsequently reported that Syrian ISPs were blocking access to Tor. Another option is to use a Virtual Private Network (VPN).

The Syrian authorities have reportedly used Iran’s expertise in online surveillance as well as filtering equipment provided by the US company Bluecoat. Syria is subject to US trade sanctions but Bluecoat insists that any equipment that may have ended up in Syrian hands was in fact [supposed to be sent to Iraq](#). The case highlights the paramount importance of monitoring the export of Internet censorship and surveillance equipment.

Legislative farce

In an example of the regime’s macabre and schizophrenic attitude towards all those who provide news and information, President Assad issued a decree on 3 December creating a National Information Council to regulate the broadcast media and Internet. It followed a 28 August [decree](#) that included a call for “respect for the fundamental freedoms contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in international conventions.” Article 11 said that “any attack on a journalist will be treated as an attack on a Syrian government official.” No one was fooled.

The latest videos from Baba Amr in Homs are evidence of the regime’s crimes against humanity. The risks being taken by journalists and bloggers and the sacrifices that ordinary citizens are making to ensure that information continues to circulate testify to the greatest fear of Syria’s dissidents, that the massacres will take place without the outside world knowing what is going on.