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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Syria

2012 Scores

Press Status: Not Free**Press Freedom Score:** 89**Legal Environment:** 29**Political Environment:** 38**Economic Environment:** 22

The unrest that swept the Middle East and North Africa took hold in Syria in 2011, with antigovernment protests erupting in the southern city of Daraa in March. The regime of President Bashar al-Assad clamped down brutally on the popular uprising, which soon spread to other cities such as Homs and Hama. In December, the United Nations estimated that more than 5,000 people had died since the start of the protests. Journalists were also targeted and subjected to violent attacks, leading to a steep decline in an already highly repressive media environment.

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 remains in place, and allows the 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; it also forbids 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 are found to challenge national sovereignty and security or offend public morality.

In August 2011, al-Assad approved a new media law that purportedly upheld freedom of expression and banned the arrest of journalists. The law outlined "positive" press freedom clauses, such as the lack of a "monopoly on the media" and the "right to access information about public affairs," and banned "the arrest, questioning, or searching of journalists." However, it also contained several anti-press clauses, including barring the media from publishing content that affects "national unity and national security," inciting sectarian strife or "hate crimes." The law also forbids the publication of any information about the armed forces. It holds editors in chief, journalists, and spokespeople accountable for actions that constitute a violation of the law and imposes fines of up to 1 million Syrian pounds (\$21,000). Article 3 states that the law "upholds freedom of expression guaranteed in the Syrian constitution" and in 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." There is no clear definition of this phrase, leaving room to use the law to crack down on journalists and reporters.

The Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCMFE), a Damascus-based nongovernmental organization, reported that the Syrian government called for a "formal declaration of war on the media" during the 2011 protests. Evidence of such was documented by the Syrian authorities' continuous attempts to crush the fourth estate by forcibly restricting coverage of the unrest, and misreporting the events of the uprising on the country's state-run television stations. Acts of lying and spreading propaganda are common on state-run outlets. In

September, the Doha Centre for Media Freedom described widespread reports in the state media calling protest organizers "infiltrators" and "radicals." These outlets also went to great lengths to denounce the alleged false reporting in the foreign press about the situation in Syria. Meanwhile, due to the near-complete absence of media that was not linked to the government in some way – even prior to the protests – the only independent source of information has been citizen journalists, who managed to provide foreign outlets with video recordings of protests and atrocities. However, the authenticity of these recordings is difficult to verify, and they have been labeled "fake" by the regime.

International media were subjected to reporting restrictions, and most foreign journalists were banned and expelled from Syria in 2011. In March, the Syrian government revoked the press credentials of Khaled Yacoub Oweis, a Jordanian national and the head of the Reuters bureau in Damascus, because of "false and unprofessional coverage" of events in the country. Officials also expelled four of his colleagues. Al-Jazeera English reporter Dorothy Parfaz disappeared upon her arrival at the Damascus airport in April; after three days in a Syrian detention center, she was deported to Iran, and was returned to Qatar in mid-May. She later described her terrifying experience in detention, as well as the beatings she overheard there.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), two journalists were killed in Syria in 2011. Ferzat Jaban, a cameraman, was last seen being placed under arrest while he was filming an antigovernment demonstration in the town of Al-Qasir on November 19. He was found dead the next day, with his body mutilated. Jarban was the first journalist killed in Syria in connection to his work since CPJ started keeping detailed records in 1992. Basel al-Sayed, a freelance videographer who was documenting clashes in Homs, was killed in December. He had been shot in the head by security forces, according to local activists and relatives.

The SCMFE monitored 114 other violations against media workers in Syria between March and October 2011. This number included a number of arrests following the implementation of the new media law in August. Reported arrests included freelance journalist Wael Yousef Abaza, who was held incommunicado in October. Amer Matar, a freelance journalist and contributor to the pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat*, was arrested in Damascus in September after covering protests. Freelance journalist Jihad Jamal was arrested at a Damascus café in October along with Sean McAllister, a British reporter working for Channel 4. McAllister, who was released after six days, said he last saw Jamal blindfolded and on his knees in an interrogation room in an unmarked building in central Damascus. Alaa al-Khodr, director of the official Syrian Arab News Agency in the eastern city of Deir al-Zour, was arrested in November. On the day of his arrest, al-Khodr had resigned from his post to protest "the regime's human rights violations against civilians."

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. 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*; as a result, truly independent media was virtually nonexistent. While these private outlets 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. Television and radio broadcasting is, in general, controlled by the state, and the few private outlets that exist do not cover news or political issues. Although the government does not preapprove content that publications and television produce, these outlets practice self-censorship for fear of being shut down or having their employees arrested. Satellite television is widely available.

Approximately 23 percent of Syrians accessed the internet in 2011. 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. The law, which significantly curtails freedom of expression on the internet, is expected to pass parliament in early 2012. Although the authorities unblocked access to social-media sites Facebook and Twitter in February 2011, they continued their crackdown on protesters' use of social media and the internet to promote their movement. The year 2011 also saw the emergence of the Syrian Electronic Army, which systematically hacked regime opponents' websites, blocked them, or flooded them with progovernment messages with the tacit approval of the Assad regime. Proregime cyberactivists also carried out the so-called Lovely Syria campaign on Twitter, which flooded the site with pictures showing scenes of beautiful Syrian landscapes, in an apparent effort to divert attention away from the daily massacres taking place and to overshadow efforts by activists to raise awareness via Twitter about the regime's brutality. The campaign was finally taken down after pressure from regime opponents and online activists on Twitter.

The regime also stepped up its harassment of bloggers in 2011. In February, blogger Taj al-Mallohi was sentenced to five years in prison for giving information to foreign states, though the sentence is likely because of her blogging about social and political issues unrelated to the protests. Several other bloggers have been arrested and detained for supporting political upheaval and social issues. The *New York Times* reported that security officials were moving on multiple fronts – demanding that dissidents turn over their Facebook passwords and switching off the 3G mobile network to limit the uploading videos to YouTube. There are about 580,000 Facebook users in Syria, a 105 percent increase since the government lifted its four-year ban. Several Syrian websites have also been preventing internet users from leaving comments on the

© **UNHCR** popular uprising in Tunisia, such as Syria News, a progovernment website, while others have allowed a few very moderate or vague comments, while removing the more explicit ones.

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