

Syria

The Syrian government has expanded the range of Web content it filters, continues to detain citizens for expressing their opinions online, and monitors Internet use closely. Broadly worded laws, characteristic of second-generation controls, invite government harassment and have prompted Internet users to engage in self-censorship and self-monitoring in order to avoid the state's ambiguous grounds for arrest.



Background

In Syria, the media are primarily owned and controlled by the government and the ruling Baath party. Criticism of the president and his family is not allowed, journalists practice self-censorship, and foreign reporters rarely receive accreditation.¹ Though there have been improvements in Syrian press freedom since Bashar al-Assad became president in 2000,² the state continues to use the ongoing state of emergency to arrest media workers.³ Journalists and political activists constantly risk arrest for virtually any reason and are “up against a whimsical and vengeful state apparatus which continually adds to the list of things banned or forbidden to be mentioned.”⁴ Syrian journalists

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No Evidence of Filtering	Suspected Filtering	Selective Filtering	Substantial Filtering	Pervasive Filtering
Political					•
Social			•		
Conflict and security				•	
Internet tools					•

Other Factors	Low	Medium	High	Not Applicable
Transparency	•			
Consistency			•	

KEY INDICATORS	
GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2005 international dollars)	4,260
Life expectancy at birth (years)	74
Literacy rate (percent of people age 15+)	83
Human development index (out of 179)	105
Rule of law (out of 211)	133
Voice and accountability (out of 209)	198
Democracy index (out of 167)	156 (Authoritarian regime)
Digital opportunity index (out of 181)	104
Internet users (percent of population)	16.7

Source by indicator: World Bank 2009a, World Bank 2009a, World Bank 2009a, UNDP 2008, World Bank 2009b, World Bank 2009b, Economist Intelligence Unit 2008, ITU 2007, ITU 2008.

have been arrested for interviewing exiled regime opponents, participating in conferences abroad, and criticizing government policies.⁵ In 2006, Reporters Without Borders ranked Syria among the 13 “enemies of the Internet,”⁶ and in 2007 described Syria as the biggest prison for cyber dissidents in the Middle East because of the number of arrests and the frequency of mistreatment of online activists.⁷ In 2009, the Committee to Protect Journalists ranked Syria third in a list of the ten worst countries in which to be a blogger, given the arrests, harassment, and restrictions that online writers in Syria have faced.⁸

The government admits to censoring “pro-Israel and hyper-Islamist” Web sites, such as those run by the illegal Muslim Brotherhood and those calling for autonomy for Syrian Kurds.⁹ In defense of these practices, former Minister of Technology and Communications Amr Salem has said that “Syria is currently under attack . . . and if somebody writes, or publishes or whatever, something that supports the attack, they will be tried.”¹⁰

Internet in Syria

The telecommunications market in Syria is the most regulated in the Middle East and is among the least developed. State-owned Syrian Telecom (STE) owns all telecommunications infrastructure and has made some substantial investment to bring services to rural areas, but limited competition exists with private ISPs competing with STE in the Internet provision market.¹¹

A government body that is part of the Ministry of Telecommunications and Technology, STE is also the regulator of telecommunications in Syria; in addition to being an ISP, it enjoys a monopoly over wired and wireless services provided anywhere in Syria.¹² Telecom providers in Syria include Syriatel,¹³ MTN,¹⁴ Aya,¹⁵ and SCS-Net, which is the ISP arm of the Syrian Computer Society.¹⁶ Additionally, MTN and Syriatel

now offer 3G mobile broadband in four major cities, as well as EDGE and GPRS connectivity (WAP) across the country.¹⁷ However, 3G is prohibitively expensive for most Syrians at nearly USD 50 per month.

The Internet was introduced to the general public in Syria in 2000 as part of the modernization reforms of President al-Assad. In the subsequent seven years, Internet use soared by 4,900 percent, far exceeding the global growth rate of 249 percent. The vast majority of Syrian users get online service at Syria's ubiquitous Internet cafés and from houses using dial-up connections over landlines.¹⁸ Syrian users continue to access blocked Web sites using proxies and circumvention tools, and prefer to use Internet cafés to browse banned content because they believe the government can monitor Web surfing through home Internet connections.¹⁹

Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

The constitution of Syria provides for freedom of speech and of the press, but the Syrian government restricts press freedom with repressive laws such as the Emergency Law, which was put in place in December 1962 and broadly mandates the censorship of various forms of communication; the 2001 Press Law which sets out sweeping controls over publications printed in Syria; articles 286 and 287 of the penal code, which criminalize spreading news abroad; and Decree No. 6 of 1965, which criminalizes "publishing news aimed at shaking the people's confidence in the revolution."²⁰

The Syrian authorities extended their censorship of Internet activities and monitoring of Internet users in March 2008 by ordering Internet café users to provide users' names, identification cards, and times they use their services.²¹ The head of the Syrian Media Center told Reuters, "These steps are designed to terrorize Internet users and spread fear and self-censorship in violation of the right to privacy and free expression."²² Government officials said these measures were necessary to guard against what they described as attempts to spread sectarian divisions and "penetration by Israel."²³

In addition, an increasing number of Syrians have faced trial or been jailed for their online writings, and the Syrian authorities continue judicial persecution of cyber dissidents. For example, Habib Saleh was tried in December 2008 for publishing articles calling for democracy in Syria on the Web site Elaph.com, which is censored in Syria, and was given a three-year prison sentence in March 2009. Saleh was convicted under article 285 of the criminal code for "weakening national sentiment" (a charge that is applicable only in wartime, said his lawyer).²⁴ Similarly, blogger Tariq Biasi received a three-year sentence for "weakening national sentiment" as well as "publishing false information" on a blog.²⁵

In addition, owners of opposition Web sites face harassment by the authorities. For example, lawyer and Web site editor Abdallah Souleiman Ali was detained for 12 days

for “persisting in publishing legal and political articles criticizing the role of the government” on his Web site Al Nazaha (alnazaha.org) in July 2008.²⁶

Access to the social networking site Facebook was blocked in November 2007 as part of a crackdown on political activism on the Internet. According to a women’s rights advocate, this action was taken because Facebook helped Syrian civil society form civic groups outside government control.²⁷ However, the government claimed that Facebook was blocked because it could become a conduit for Israeli penetration of Syrian youth.²⁸ The advocacy group Syrian Media Center claims that at least 153 Web sites have been blocked, among which are Blogger (owned by Google), the Arabic blogging host service Maktoob, YouTube, and Web sites of opposition parties, Lebanese newspapers, and Lebanese groups opposed to “Syrian interference in Lebanon.”²⁹ In September 2008, the Public Institution for Telecommunication ordered the blocking of the entire Web site of the Cairo-based Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) as well as their blogs (www.katib.org). Prior to that, only one page on ANHRI’s site containing information about human rights violations in Syria was blocked. The organization believes that this blocking was ordered by the security forces, “which have a louder voice than the law and the Constitution in Syria.”³⁰

Internet cafés in Syria are subject to tough measures that make opening one very difficult. To start an Internet café, one needs to get a license from the Syrian Telecommunications Institution, as well as a security license from the Interior Ministry, which sets security instructions that require each café visitor to provide his or her name, identification, and the names of his or her mother and father.³¹ The café owner must also show visitors which religious and political Web sites they are banned from using.³² Failure to follow the rules can result in closure of the café, large fines, and, in extreme cases, jail time.³³

Surveillance

On its Web site, STE states that the telecommunications it provides remain private and shall not be shared except by law and regulations at an official request.³⁴

However, café operators have reported that the authorities ask them to spy on their customers and that they believe everything is monitored.³⁵ A young cyber dissident who was arrested at an Internet café in Damascus in late 2006 for his critical online writings said security services often request café owners to spy on clients, and they provide them with software programs for the task.³⁶ In addition, as mentioned earlier, Internet café operators must keep a record of their clients’ names and identification to present to the authorities on request.

Furthermore, Syria-based Web sites were ordered by the government in 2007 to reveal the identity and name of those behind any article or comment they published.³⁷

The use of cell phones is also subject to surveillance. The Interior Ministry and the Syrian Telecommunications Institution have banned the sale of cell phones that have GPS and have WAP services that are not being properly monitored by the service providers.³⁸

Technical censorship in Syria is implemented using software from a Canadian company called Platinum, Inc.³⁹ The company uses the ThunderCache solution for URL filtering, which is a system capable of monitoring and controlling a user's dynamic Web-based activities as well as conducting deep packet inspection.⁴⁰

ONI Testing Results

OpenNet Initiative testing was conducted on two ISPs in Syria: formally SCS-Net (also known as Aloola) and Aya.

The testing results for 2008–2009 indicate that Syria's Internet filtering regime has increased the scope and depth of targeted content. Censorship has been extended to include high-profile Web sites such as the video-sharing site YouTube, the social networking site Facebook, and the online shop Amazon.

Political filtering continues to be pervasive. For example, Web sites of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood such as ikhwansyria.com and jimsyr.com (now defunct) were blocked. Unlike results from 2006 to 2007, more Web sites affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, including that of the Egyptian branch, were blocked. Examples include www.ikhwanonline.com, www.ikhwanweb.com, and www.ikhwan.net.

Results from 2006 to 2007 testing indicated that only two Kurdish Web sites were blocked, but results from 2008 to 2009 testing show that several Kurdish Web sites have been added to the block list. These include www.kurdnas.com, amude.net, www.kurdistanabinxete.com, www.pajk-online.com, www.kurdmedya.com, and www.kurdax.net.

Also blocked were the Web site of the United States Committee for a Free Lebanon (freelebanon.org), which campaigns for an end to Syrian influence in Lebanese politics; the Web site of the Lebanese Forces (www.lebanese-forces.org); and some Lebanese newspapers such as www.annahar.com.

Several political Web sites were also filtered. Among them are the Web site of the Reform Party of Syria (www.reformsyria.org), a Web site of a communist party in Syria (www.syriaalaan.com), the Web site of the Hizb al-Tahrir or Liberation Party (www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org)—an Islamist group that seeks to restore the Caliphate—and various news and oppositional Web sites such as www.thisissyria.net, www.free-syria.com, and www.syriatruth.org.

The tests conducted by ONI revealed that a number of Syrian blogs hosted on Google's popular blogging engine Blogger (blogspot.com) continue to be blocked, a

finding which strongly suggests that ISPs have blocked access to all blogs hosted on this service, including many apolitical blogs. Interestingly, Blogger.com (the site from which users of the service write posts) is not blocked, meaning Syrian users can blog but cannot read blogs (including their own). Also blocked was freesyria.wordpress.com, a blog created to campaign for the release of Michel Kilo, a prominent Syrian journalist imprisoned for his writings.

Results for 2008–2009 confirmed that Syria has unblocked access to the popular e-mail service Hotmail as well as the small Web-based e-mail sites address.com and netaddress.com. All three were found to be blocked in previous rounds of testing. None of the Arabic-language e-mail sites ONI tested were blocked, though the Arabic-language hosting site www.khayma.com was. Among the few Web sites found unblocked since 2006–2007 testing were the localized Arabic version of Wikipedia and the Web site of the Lebanese Free Patriotic Movement (www.tayyar.org).

Though most foreign news Web sites were accessible, those of some prominent Arabic newspapers and news portals were found to be blocked. Examples include the pan-Arab, London-based, Arabic-language newspapers *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (www.alquds.co.uk/) and *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* (www.asharqalawsat.com), the news portal elaph.com, the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al Seyassah* (www.alseyassah.com), the U.S.-based Web site of the *Arab Times* (www.arabtimes.com), and the Islam-oriented news and information portal Islam Online (islamonline.net). These publications frequently run articles critical of the Syrian government.

Web sites of human rights organizations were generally available. Those associated with the London-based Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) and the Web site of the Syrian Observatory Human Rights (www.syriaahr.com) were notable exceptions. As indicated previously, some blogs that criticize the human rights record of Syria were also blocked.

Several Israeli Web sites were tested to confirm whether or not Syria blocks the entire “.il” domain. All tested Web sites within the domain were blocked, suggesting that the entire domain is indeed blocked. In addition, URLs containing the keyword “Israel” were found to be blocked.

Nearly one-third of the anonymizer Web sites tested were blocked, indicating some measure of effort to preempt circumvention. None of the Web sites containing pornographic content were found to be blocked, including the select few found blocked in 2006–2007 testing. Additionally, as in the 2006–2007 rounds of testing, Web sites that focus on LGBT issues were generally available.

Syrian ISPs offer an optional filtering system to block content deemed immoral and violent, as well as chat Web sites. The ONI did not test the scope and depth of these optional systems.

Filtering continues to lack transparency; there is no explicit block page, and the ISPs and telecom regulators do not publish clear information about what they filter.

Conclusion

In addition to high-profile Web sites such as YouTube, Amazon, and Facebook, the Web sites blocked in Syria span a range of categories, with the most substantial filtering being of Web sites that criticize government policies and actions or espouse oppositional political views. Repressive legislation and the imprisonment of journalists and bloggers for their activities online have led many Syrians to engage in self-censorship, which conforms to second-generation controls found in other parts of the world. Meanwhile, the government continues to promote the growth of the Internet throughout the country.

Notes

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