Syria

Country:
Syria
Year:
2017
Press Freedom Status:
Not Free
PFS Score:
90
Legal Environment:
29
Political Environment:
38
Economic Environment:
23

Key Developments in 2016:

• At least 14 journalists were killed in connection with their work during the year, the majority of whom died as a result of Syrian government air strikes or clashes between armed groups.
• The Islamic State (IS) militant group continued its brutal crackdown on dissent, releasing a graphic video of the murder of five media activists and threatening other journalists who criticize its rule.
• Five foreign journalists were released by or escaped from the militant group Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra.

Executive Summary

Syria remained one of the most dangerous places in the world to practice journalism, as its multilateral civil war pitted the repressive government of President Bashar al-Assad against IS, Kurdish separatists, and an array of opposition militias. Journalists were killed, kidnapped, threatened, or subjected to assassination attempts across most of the country. Territory controlled by IS and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham were especially high-risk areas for kidnapping. As a result, few foreign reporters ventured to the northern and eastern
provinces of Aleppo, Raqqa, and Deir al-Zour during the year, leaving local journalists to covertly gather and disseminate news.

Syrian journalists in general were more exposed to violence than their foreign counterparts. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), all but one of the 14 journalists killed during the year were Syrian, and the majority of those injured and threatened because of their work were also local reporters.

**Legal Environment: 29 / 30**

Article 43 of the Syrian constitution provides for freedom 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, 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 ($4,600). 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.” Such broad wording gives the authorities leeway to crack down on journalists.

In addition to media laws, the government has used security-related legislation to control and punish journalists. At least seven Syrian journalists were incarcerated in government prisons as of December 2016, according to CPJ. Although in most cases the authorities released little or no information about any charges against them, those known to have faced prosecution were tried by military or state security courts for antistate crimes. Syrian authorities regularly use torture and other abuse to extract confessions and account passwords.

The media law ostensibly provides for access to government information, but officials have broad discretion to withhold information on security and other grounds, and journalists are unable to make use of such information requests in practice.

In government-controlled areas, a National Media Council (NMC) regulates the information sector. Among other duties, it sets conditions for licenses, issues them to private media outlets, specifies rules on funding, and issues press credentials to journalists. The NMC lacks independence, and effectively serves 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 also regularly criticizes media coverage that is displeasing to the regime, and works to intimidate outlets into taking a progovernment editorial line.

Outside of territories controlled by the government, the legal environment for the media varies depending on the group in control. IS dominated significant parts of the country’s north and east in 2016, while also making smaller inroads into central Syria. It
systematically enforces its own repressive legal regime, including provisions pertaining to the media.

Legal conditions are somewhat more permissive in Syrian Kurdistan, known locally as Rojava, where Kurdish leaders and militias have established functional autonomy during the civil war. In 2014, Rojava formally declared local autonomy and established its own constitution, which includes protections for the media. Article 24 affirms “the right to freedom of opinion and expression.” 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.

In 2013, Kurdish authorities established the Union of Free Media (YRA), an official 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 force in Rojava, appears to exercise partisan influence over media regulation. In recent years, Kurdish authorities have revoked the licenses of Orient TV, a Syrian opposition station, and the Rudaw Media Network, which is affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), a PYD rival that governs in Iraqi Kurdistan. The outlets, which were accused of publishing “lies” that incited violence and internal discord, were banned in the eastern Jazira Canton in 2015. The central Kobani Canton followed suit with its own bans in February 2016; Rudaw reported that the canton’s PYD authorities had barred local journalists and freelancers from working with the network and warned other entities to cut off contact.

**Political Environment: 38 / 40**

Authorities in government-held areas continued to forcibly restrict news coverage during 2016. 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 combination of intensifying censorship and the economic strain of war has sharply reduced media diversity in territory controlled by the government. Only a few dozen print publications remain in circulation, down from several hundred prior to the conflict. Most are locally based generalist and lifestyle publications, and few deal with politics or current events. Visas for the foreign press are restricted in government-held areas. Journalists are subject to onerous restrictions on their movements and activities, but are sometimes able to flout them given the chaotic security situation, which weakens the government’s ability to police the media. The government uses cyberattacks to disable media outlets and spy on journalists’ communications.

IS tightly controlled the dissemination of information in areas where it exercised authority in 2016. In 2014, observers obtained a list of 11 restrictions issued by the IS press office, including a rule requiring journalists to submit most of their work to official censorship bodies prior to publication. IS also employs an expansive propaganda operation in its territory. It produces a multilingual magazine, *Dabiq*, and has achieved notoriety for its...
sophisticated use of social media for recruitment and propaganda purposes. Like the
government, IS is known to direct cyberattacks against journalists and activists.

Critical media operating in both government-held and IS-held territory do so at great risk,
and thus circulate their materials primarily underground or online. Citizen journalists have
helped to fill the gap created by restrictions on mainstream media and have played an
integral role in documenting protests and atrocities. For example, uncensored articles and
videos from IS areas have been made available to the outside world through media
groups such as Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently and Eye on the Homeland, whose
citizen journalists work secretly and face lethal punishment if detected by the militant
group.

In Rojava and areas held by various opposition rebel groups, the loss of government
control has led to a proliferation of outlets. While some are independent, others are
affiliated with particular political factions and show a corresponding bias. According to a
report published in December 2016 by the Middle East Institute, there are at least 196
active media outlets operating in Syria. Of those, 71 are progovernment, a further 71 are
aligned with the opposition, 39 are described as independent, and 14 are listed as
independent outlets focused on the Kurdish areas. The report notes that the majority of
the outlets deemed independent are antigovernment by virtue of their support for a
democratic Syria.

Syria is one of the world’s most dangerous countries for the press. Journalists face
multiple obstacles to reporting safely, including the danger of being caught in cross fire or
bombardments, or directly targeted and killed. Journalists are also at risk of harassment,
imimidation, and detention in all parts of the country, including areas held by opposition
and Kurdish forces. At least 14 reporters were killed in connection with their work during
2016, according to CPJ, the same number as in 2015. Although the majority of those
killed, including one Iranian reporter, died in air strikes or combat situations, several others
were deliberately murdered.

In June, IS released a graphic video showing the murder of five Syrian media activists
who had worked to document the militant group’s abuses in Deir al-Zour. The video
included an explicit threat to other journalists and media activists, warning that any critical
reporting would put their lives at risk. Also in June, Khaled Eissa, a journalist opposed to
the Assad government, died of injuries he sustained a week earlier from a bomb planted
outside his home. Opposition media described the attack as an assassination attempt
against Eissa and fellow reporter Hadi Abdullah.

A number of journalists have gone missing while working in Syria. Most are Syrian, but
they also include Austin Tice, a U.S. photographer last heard from in August 2012, and
Jumpei Yasuda, a Japanese reporter last heard from in June 2015. In May 2016, three
Spanish journalists were released by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham after 10 months of
confinement; it was reported that an $11 million ransom was paid to the group. American
freelancer Lindsey Snell was detained by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in July, but was able to
negotiate her own release, only to be arrested by Turkish authorities while crossing the
border in August. She was later released and deported. German freelance reporter Jaina
Findeisen was also able to escape Jabhat Fatah al-Sham custody in September, having
been held captive since October 2015.
In April, masked assailants attacked an independent radio station in Rojava, Arta FM. The gunmen abducted and threatened the station’s director, warning him to stop broadcasting, then set fire to the station’s offices. It continued to broadcast via satellite.

**Economic Environment: 23 / 30**

In regime-held territory, the government and allied businessmen own most print and broadcast outlets and tightly control editorial policy. As a result, genuinely independent media in these sectors are virtually nonexistent. New print and broadcast outlets have emerged in opposition-controlled territory, but their financing—which relies on Syrian expatriates and international donors—hinders viability, and staff are mostly volunteers. Some outlets are based abroad and maintain a reporting staff in Syria. Orient TV, the opposition television channel owned by exiled Syrian automotive mogul Ghassan Aboud, broadcasts via satellite from Dubai and has correspondents based in Syria.

Rojava is home to a number of local media outlets, including Ronahi TV, Arta FM, the newspaper *Nudem*, and the news agency Hawar News. However, these too suffer from economic constraints, 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.

About 32 percent of the population used the internet as of 2016, and social media and communication tools such as Skype are increasingly employed to transmit news. War-related damage to infrastructure and deliberate interference by combatants cause frequent power outages and disruption of telecommunications. Government forces obstruct internet access in besieged rebel-held areas, and IS tightly restricts access in territory under its control. Opposition groups sometimes circumvent these problems by using satellite devices to access the internet and telephone service.

Syria’s war-ravaged economy is not conducive to sustaining private outlets. Several opposition media outlets closed their print operations in 2016, choosing to publish online only due to financial challenges and physical insecurity. The Kurdish news website Welati shut down in May, citing financial difficulties.

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