Syria Country Report | Freedom on the Net 2018

According to latest available estimates by the International Telecommunication Union, nearly 30 percent of Syrians had access to the internet, up from 21 percent in 2010. The price, speed, and availability of internet access varies across regions. In a positive development, the cost of access decreased across regions in the past year. There were fewer restrictions on cybercafés, particularly in IS-held territories. Nonetheless, mobile phone penetration increased and internet access became more affordable across several regions (see Availability and Ease of Access).

Key Developments:

June 1, 2017 - May 31, 2018

- Mobile phone penetration increased and internet access became more affordable across several regions (see Availability and Ease of Access).
- Numerous regional and Lebanese media websites, Wikipedia, and the WordPress blogosphere were unblocked in 2017. The block on the Israeli domain (.il) was also lifted. No formal rationale was provided for the unblocking decision, though analysts think that as the government has gained ground in the civil war, it may be trying to demonstrate a reformist attitude toward freedom of expression.
- In August 2017, it was confirmed that digital activist Bassel Khartabil Safadi was executed by the regime’s security forces in 2015. He had been detained in 2012 for his democratic activism.
- Law Number 9, passed in March 2018, establishes specialized courts for criminal cases related to communication and technology; critics worry the courts could be used to further suppress freedom of expression online (see Legal Environment).

Introduction:

Despite heavy restrictions on internet freedom, the cost and availability of internet access improved over the past year. The unexplained unblocking of several websites was offset by heightened self-censorship amid growing threats and violent reprisals for online posts (see Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation; and Intimidation and Violence).

In March 2018, the government passed Law Number 9, which established specialized courts for criminal cases related to information and communication technologies. Judges on these courts will be specially trained to handle technology issues, although the results of this training on human rights conditions are yet to be seen. The lack of judicial independence in Syria has led to concerns that the new law could be used to suppress freedom of expression and criminalize critics of the regime even further.

Despite relative improvements to access, Syria remains one of the most dangerous places to use the internet in the world. According to Reporters Without Borders, 12 citizen journalists were killed in 2017. In August 2017, violence). The New Syrian, Enab Baladi, and Souriali Radio. Many nonpolitical websites were also unblocked, such as Wikipedia and the WordPress blogosphere. Notably, the block on the Israeli domain (.il) was also lifted. No formal rationale was provided for the unblocking decision, though analysts think that as the government has gained ground in the civil war, it may be trying to demonstrate a reformist attitude toward freedom of expression.

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Obstacles to Access:

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Availability and Ease of Access

Syria’s telecommunications infrastructure is one of the least developed in the Middle East, with broadband connections among the most difficult and expensive to acquire. This worsened after 2011, as electricity outages increased dramatically following public protests and the government’s corresponding crackdown. Damage to the communications infrastructure is particularly severe in cities where the government is no longer in control, largely due to bombing and other damage caused by the civil war. As a result, a decentralized telecommunications infrastructure has developed, with each part of the country finding different sources of connectivity.

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Restrictions on Connectivity

The government has carried out extensive and reported internet shutdowns since 2011. Damage to the telecommunications infrastructure led to a disconnection in Aleppo from March to November 2015.11

In a positive development, authorities had unblocked a number of regional and Lebanese media websites by the end of 2017, including Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, Al-Manar, and Al-Dostour. In addition to blocking websites, authorities forced the owners of a number of websites to shut them down, including the news sites Al-Quds Al-Arabi and the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Siyassah, as well as the websites of human rights groups such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the Syrian Human Rights Council, and Dar al-Shifa, a magazine that offers the perspectives of young Syrians.

Facebook has been accessible since the government lifted a four-year block on the social network in 2011. The video-sharing website YouTube was also unblocked. Some activists suspected that the regime blocked the sites to track cunstains’ online activities and identities. As of 2018, both were among the top three most visited websites in the country. Other social media platforms such as Twitter are also available.

Skype, on the other hand, has suffered frequent disruptions, either due to low speeds or intermittent blocking by authorities. In February 2012, the government also began restricting access to some applications on mobile phones that activates had been using to circumvent other blocks. Activists say the software and updates to operating systems remain blocked due to U.S. sanctions, to the dismay of many U.S.-based activists.

The government continues to block circumvention tools, internet security software, and applications that enable anonymous communications. By enabling deep packet inspection (DPI) filtering on the Syrian network, authorities were able to block secure communication tools such as Signal and ProtonMail.

In addition to blocking websites, authorities forced the owners of a number of websites to shut them down, including the news sites Syrian Mirror and An-Naharah ("Integrity"), whose owner was arrested by the Information Branch of the General Intelligence Directorate that forced the website’s closure.

Censorship is implemented by the STE and private ISPs, using various commercially available software programs. Independent reports in recent years pointed to the use of ThunderCache software, which is capable of filtering text messages since 2011, especially around the dates of planned protests. In February 2012, Bloomberg, using evidence from a series of interviews and leaked documents, reported that a special government unit had ordered Blue Coat to block text messages containing key words like “revolution” or “demonstration.” The providers reportedly implemented the directives with the help of technology originally purchased from two Irish firms to restrict spam.

Decisions surrounding online censorship lack transparency, and ISPs do not publicize the details of how blocking is implemented or which websites are blocked, though government officials have publicly admitted to engaging in online censorship. When a user seeks access to a blocked website, an error message appears implying a technical problem rather than deliberate government restriction. The entity (STE) that implements the block is not specified, and ISPs are not required to notify their customers of the reasons for the blocking.

Consequently, the government has been able to control access to information and block websites without fear of legal reprimand or public accountability. Activists and human rights advocates express dismay that thousands of websites and dozens of channels documenting war crimes and human rights abuses were removed from the YouTube platform in mid-2017, after YouTube applied a “machine learning” algorithm that tracks any content that could violate the platform’s rules. YouTube has since restored a number of channels and reported thousands of clips that were mistakenly removed.

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

According to digital security organization Scedox, the Facebook pages of dozens of opposition groups, media outlets, and independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been suspended by the social network over the years. The Facebook pages of LCC and the London-based Syrian Network for Human Rights have been banned, as well. Activists believe that Facebook users sympathetic to President Assad may be reporting the pages en masse for violating user guidelines. Razan Zaitouneh and the Violations Documentation Center shared a letter urging Facebook to keep the pages open, stating that “Facebook pages are the only outlet that allows us to share the events and atrocities to the world.” Representatives from Facebook have cited the difficulties in discerning between objective reporting and propaganda, particularly since many armed extremist groups use the platform.

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the besieged town of Madaya. Activists have also established the Syria Observatory, a group on channels of social media networks linked to other observatories inside of Syria, which aims to reduce the number of casualties and damage caused by air strikes by spreading warnings of approaching warplanes, including their whereabouts, potential targets, and estimated arrival times, in addition to the exact time of observation. The Observatory works through a Telegram channel and a Facebook Messenger application.

Syrians are active on Facebook, using it as a platform to share news, discuss events, release statements, and coordinate both offline and online activities.

The civil war has been called the first "YouTube War" due to the volume of human rights violations, military battles, and post-conflict devastation that has been captured in videos posted to the site. Indeed, as the Syrian government shifted to the use of heavy arms and missiles against opposition fighters, the role of citizen journalists has shifted from live event coverage to documenting the bloody aftermath of attacks. Although many obstacles stand in the way of media coverage, citizen journalists have developed techniques to ensure coverage of remote areas and conflict zones. "Local Media Observers" ensure that local journalists cover limited geographic areas, while citizen journalists use social networks as a platform to collect, verify, and publish news stories. Hundreds of thousands of videos have been posted to YouTube by citizen journalists, rebel groups, and civil society groups, mostly documenting attacks. A group that categorized YouTube videos and shared them via the platform Onlyropia posted almost 200,000 videos in 2013.

Violations of User Rights:

Law Number 9, passed in March 2018, establishes specialized courts for criminal cases related to communication and technology; critics worry the courts could be used to further suppress freedom of expression online. Citizen journalists, bloggers, and activists were detained and often tortured while in detention.Netizens were confirmed killed during the coverage period.

Legal Environment

Laws such as the penal code, the 1963 State of Emergency Law, and the 2001 Press Law are used to control traditional media and arrest journalists or internet users based on vaguely worded language such as "threatening national unity" or "publishing false news that may weaken national defense." Defamation offenses are punishable by up to one year in prison to publish comments against the president and up to six months in prison for libel against other government officials, including judges, the military, or civil servants. The cybercrime law allows prison sentences of up to three years and fines of up to STG 200,000 (US$460) for anyone who incites or promotes terrorism through any network. The judiciary is largely independent, but its decisions are often arbitrary. Some citizens have been cleared of illegal charges and then tried before military courts.

In March 2018, the government passed Law Number 9, which establishes specialized courts for criminal cases related to communication and technology. Some analysts view the creation of such courts as a positive step. Judges on these courts will be specially trained to handle technology issues. However, the lack of judicial independence in Syria has led to concerns that the new law could be used to suppress freedom of expression and criminalize criticism.

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Since antigovernment protests broke out in 2011, the authorities have detained hundreds of internet users, including several well-known bloggers and citizen journalists. While it is difficult to obtain information on recent arrests, at least 15 netizens remain in prison according to Reporters Without Borders, an international NGO. Bassel Khabtali, an open source activist and recipient of the 2013 Index on Censorship Digital Freedom Award, was detained by the authorities in March 2012 and subsequently executed (see Intimidation and Violence).

Human rights activists who work online are also targeted by the government and rebels. Four members of the Violations Documentation Center (VDC) were kidnapped by an unknown group from a rebel-controlled area in December 2015. Authorities raided the offices of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) in February 2012, arresting 14 employees. One SCM member and civil rights lawyer, Razan Ghazawi, was detained for 22 days. The other members were released in August 2013 after five years in pretrial detention. The Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham arrested a number of digital activists in the governorate of Idlib on various charges, such as "media work against HTS," which is the charge that media activists Amjad Al-Malh, Husein Malem, and Bake Younis faced when they were arrested in December 2017. Activists launched a media campaign for their release, under the slogan "Free Madaya Activists," and a number of organizations signed a statement demanding their release.
resulting in the account posting shortened links to SEA sites. The hackers had gained access to the Google account of an OFA staffer. Also in 2013, the SEA hacked the website and Twitter feed of Human Rights Watch, redirecting visitors to the SEA homepage. These tactics continued with the high-profile hacking of Forbes in 2014 and the Washington Post in 2015.


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