Syria

Country: Syria
Year: 2016
Press Freedom Status: NF
PFS Score: 90
Legal Environment: 29
Political Environment: 38
Economic Environment: 23

Overview

As the civil war raged on, Syria remained among the world’s most dangerous places to practice journalism in 2015. Dozens of journalists were killed, injured, abducted, or imprisoned by the government of President Bashar al-Assad, various opposition factions, and the Islamic State (IS). The Assad regime’s loss of control in many parts of the country has permitted the emergence of new media outlets and reduced censorship in some rebel-held territories. However, IS brutally suppressed independent media in the areas where it exercised authority. A handful of citizen journalists operating in IS-controlled areas continued to produce uncensored news, at great risk to their own lives.

Key Developments

• In 2015, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) documented 14 instances in which a journalist was killed in connection with their work.
• IS maintained its campaign against freedom of expression, in part by issuing more videos of journalists’ executions.
• In a rare positive development, media freedom activist Mazen Darwish was released from a government prison in August, and a long-running legal case against him and his colleagues was later dismissed. Darwish had been detained for three years.
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.” This broad wording gives the authorities leeway to crack down on journalists if they wish.

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 displeasing to the regime, and works to intimidate outlets into taking a progovernment editorial line. In March 2015, it issued a statement blasting media outlets for reporting negatively on the state of the economy, insisting that they discuss the role of “terrorism” and Western economic sanctions in Syria’s economic problems. In September, the NMC criticized outlets for using allegedly sympathetic language to describe armed opposition groups, and insisted that they instead refer to such groups as “terrorists.” And in November, the manager of the website Syria Daily News was forced to issue a public apology after he criticized the council in a Facebook post. The NMC had requested that a criminal prosecution be initiated against him, but dropped its request later that month, following his apology.

In addition to media laws, the government has used security-related legislation to control and punish journalists. Darwish, president of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), was arrested in 2012 alongside four SCM colleagues for allegedly “publicizing terrorist acts,” an offense outlined in a 2012 antiterrorism law. Two of his codefendants were provisionally released in 2013 (though their charges were not dropped), while Darwish and two others remained in detention. A trial for the whole group took place in 2014, but the court repeatedly delayed its verdict, leaving them in a state of legal limbo. In July 2015, two of Darwish’s colleagues remaining in detention were granted provisional release, and Darwish himself was freed in August. Later in August, a court determined that all five defendants were covered under an amnesty decree for political dissidents issued in 2014, and the case was finally dismissed.

The legal environment for the media in territories outside the government’s influence varies depending on the group in control. In 2015, IS continued to control large parts of
the country’s north and east, though it retreated from large swaths of the Kurdish north, while also making some smaller inroads into central Syria. The group 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 local 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 and freedom of expression. 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. Some reports suggest that the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the dominant Kurdish political party in Rojava, exercises undue influence over the body, though others dispute that characterization. Nevertheless, a variety of print and broadcast outlets are generally allowed to operate, including those that are critical of the ruling party.

**Political Environment: 38 / 40**

Authorities in government-held areas continued to forcibly restrict news coverage during 2015. 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 Assad 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 loss of government control over parts of the country has led to a proliferation of new media outlets, including many print publications based in rebel-held territories. Most are small and serve local audiences. Some are affiliated with particular opposition factions, and take on accompanying biases that can be inflammatory. A coalition of local activists and foreign donor organizations has helped to organize a grassroots network of several television and radio stations, a dozen newspapers, and several dozen media offices across opposition-controlled Syria.

Critical media working in regime-held territory do so at great risk, and thus circulate their materials primarily underground or online. Citizen journalists help to fill the gap created by restrictions on mainstream media and have played an integral role in documenting
protests and atrocities. Citizen journalists tend to work in decentralized “media centers” based in residential spaces, using simple equipment that is often funded by outside actors, such as Syrian expatriates and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

The Syrian government regularly uses violence and arbitrary detentions to punish dissent and critical reporting. At least 30 journalists were being held in state-run prisons as of late 2015, according to Reporters Without Borders. American freelancer Austin Tice has been missing in Syria since 2012; there have been reports that he is among those being held by the government.

At least 14 journalists were killed in connection with their work in Syria in 2015, according to CPJ. Some were reportedly caught in crossfire between combatants or killed in airstrikes. Activists claimed in October 2015 that two journalists were killed in separate airstrikes in Idlib and Aleppo Provinces that were carried out by Russian forces aiding the Assad regime. Journalists operating in rebel-held areas risk of being imprisoned and killed by armed opposition groups. Several international journalists who operated in Syria are currently missing, having disappeared in parts of Syria held by IS or the Nusra Front. A number of Syrian journalists are also missing, presumed held by various militant groups or executed.

IS tightly controls the dissemination of information in areas where it exercises authority. Uncensored articles and videos are only made available to the outside world through a few media groups, such as Raqqa is Being Silently Slaughtered (RBSS) and Eye on the Homeland, whose citizen journalists operate secretly and at great risk to their lives. 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, which is based in its de facto capital, Raqqa, and has achieved notoriety for its sophisticated use of social media for recruitment and propaganda purposes.

IS regularly uses violence and the threat of violence to silence critics of its rule. In January 2015, the militant group beheaded the Japanese journalist Kenji Goto, who had been in captivity for several months. In July, the group executed two men it accused of working for RBSS, though the veracity of those claims is unclear. IS featured each of the executions in propaganda videos. In December, Ahmed Mohamed al-Mousa, an editor for RBSS, was shot dead in front of his home by an unknown assailant, though many observers suspect that IS was responsible.

In Rojava, where independent and Kurdish-language media were banned prior to the civil war, many new local outlets have been established in recent years, and foreign media are allowed to enter and operate with fewer restrictions than in the rest of Syria. However, the local Kurdish media are highly politicized. Most outlets, and all television stations, are affiliated with political parties and are often critical of their partisan rivals. The main division is between the PYD and its supporters on the one hand, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)—the largest party in Iraqi Kurdistan—and its affiliates on the other. In August 2015, PYD officials cancelled the operating licenses of the Erbil-based Rudaw Media Network, associated with the KDP, and Orient TV, an outlet owned by an exiled Syrian tycoon who opposes Assad, accusing each of inciting violence and spreading false news.
Economic Environment: 23 / 30

In regime-held territory, the government and allied businessmen own most newspaper-publishing houses and tightly control editorial policy. The owners of most private outlets—including *Al-Watan*, *Al-Iqtisad*, and *Al-Khabar*—have close ties to the regime. As a result, genuinely independent print media are virtually nonexistent. All television channels are state-owned, and the government directly controls all programming and content. New print and broadcast outlets have emerged in opposition-controlled territory, but their financing—which relies on Syrian expatriates and international NGOs—hinders viability, and staff are mostly volunteers. Some outlets are based abroad while maintaining 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 nearly two dozen correspondents based in Syria. Syria’s war-ravaged economy is not conducive to sustaining private outlets, and the overall economic situation grew worse in 2015.

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

Approximately 30 percent of Syrians accessed the internet in 2015, and social-media websites and communication tools such as Skype are increasingly used to transmit news. War-related damage to infrastructure and deliberate interference by combatants cause frequent power outages and disruption of telecommunications. Opposition groups have begun to circumvent these problems by using satellite devices to access the internet and telephone service.

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