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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Syria

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The uprisings that swept across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 reached Syria in March of that year, when antigovernment protests erupted in the southern city of Daraa. The regime of President Bashar al-Assad used deadly force in a bid to crush the popular uprising, which soon spread to other cities and developed an armed component. In December 2012 the United Nations estimated that more than 40,000 people had died in what was by that point a civil war. Journalists have been targeted in violent attacks, and 30 were killed during 2012 by either the regime or the opposition. However, the regime's loss of control in large parts of the country resulted in the emergence of new media outlets and a de facto reduction in censorship, leading to a slight improvement in Syria's overall 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, in place until 2011, allowed the authorities to arrest journalists under ambiguous charges of threatening "national security," which in effect nullified the constitution protections. 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 (\$7,700 to \$15,500). 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.

A new media law issued in 2011 prohibits a "monopoly on the media," guarantees the "right to access information about public affairs," and bans "the arrest, questioning, or searching of journalists." However, it bars the media from publishing content that affects "national unity and national security" or 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 spokespersons accountable for violations and prescribes fines of up to 1 million Syrian pounds (\$15,500). 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 for authorities to use the law to crack down on journalists and reporters. Consequently, despite the lifting of the 1963 State of Emergency law in late 2011, there has been little change in the treatment of journalists in practice. The government continued to arrest reporters under the ambiguous charge of threatening "national security" in 2012.

The worsening conflict has transformed the media landscape in the country. Syrian authorities continued to forcibly restrict coverage of the unrest during the year, and state-run television stations misreported the events of the uprising. False statements and propaganda are common on state-run outlets, whose journalists routinely refer to the opposition as "terrorists" or "radicals." In addition, since the beginning of the conflict, al-Assad has imposed a foreign media blackout, barring most foreign journalists from entering and reporting in the country. The regime offered 70 visas to foreign journalists in 2012, but they were required to be escorted by state representatives who determined what they could cover. At the same time, the government lost effective control over large portions of the country, meaning its laws and restrictions could not be enforced in those areas. Self-censorship is therefore less pervasive, and red lines are increasingly being crossed. Media outlets such as Sham FM, a privately owned radio station that previously did not cover politics, have started to report on political issues and become key sources of news to Syrians. Opposition-oriented newspapers such as *Suriyina*, *Oxygen*, *Hurriyat*, and *Enab Baladi* have also sprung up, though they tend to circulate either underground or mostly online. Citizen journalists continue to be critical in providing foreign outlets with video recordings of protests and atrocities, but the authenticity of these recordings is difficult to verify, and they have routinely been labeled "fake" by the regime.

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Not Free

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As a result of this more complex environment, a propaganda war has emerged in the country, in which both the regime and armed rebels try to restrict or control information by attacking journalists and media organizations. In February 2012, government forces raided the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, a Damascus-based nongovernmental organization, and arrested its head, Mazen Darwish, and 13 others. In May, security forces harassed a Sky News camera crew that was filming a demonstration in Damascus and detained two journalists, even though the government had given them credentials to work in the city. In July, government forces destroyed a radio tower in Aleppo that was carrying a station established by university students and staff. Meanwhile, state-run media also suffered attacks. In June, an unidentified group of gunmen attacked a progovernment television station, killing seven employees and destroying its studios.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 30 journalists were killed in Syria in 2012, making the country by far the deadliest place in the world to practice journalism. Those targeted included foreign, state, and citizen journalists. Shukri Abu al-Burghul, host of state-owned Radio Damascus and editor of state-owned *Al-Thawra*, died in January after being shot by unidentified gunmen in December 2011. Also in January, Gilles Jacquier, a French television reporter, became the first foreign journalist to be killed in Syria. He died as a result of shelling while covering a progovernment rally. The next month, foreign journalists Marie Colvin and Rémi Ochlik were killed in the shelling of a building that was being used as a makeshift media center. In April, in a sign of the war's growing impact on neighboring countries, Syrian forces killed Lebanese cameraman Ali Shaaban in the northern Lebanese region of Wadi Khaled, near the Syrian border. Abductions have also been a serious problem. U.S. freelance journalist Austin Tice has been held in captivity since August, presumably by progovernment forces. Meanwhile, rebel fighters kidnapped three journalists working for progovernment media in August; two were freed by the Syrian army, but the third was killed along with two rebels. Rebel forces also kidnapped a reporter for the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation in October. Attacks on journalists at their homes have increased. In September, Syrian security forces killed a journalist from Sham News Network and three of his friends by burning his house. Basel Tawfiq Youssef, a reporter for Syrian state television, and Naji Assad, editor of state-run *Tishreen*, were shot outside their homes in separate incidents. Arrests and torture of citizen journalists and freelancers continued throughout the year.

Although the authorities unblocked access to the social-media sites Facebook and Twitter in February 2011, they continued their crackdown on citizen journalists' use of social media and the internet to disseminate information about regime abuses. The so-called Syrian Electronic Army (SEA), which emerged in 2011, continued to hack opposition websites, block them, or flood them with progovernment messages—with the tacit approval of the regime. In 2012, the SEA hacked into the Twitter accounts and websites of prominent foreign media outlets such as Reuters, Al-Jazeera, and Al-Arabiya. The regime and the SEA also continued their harassment of bloggers and online activists. The government used surveillance equipment to intercept communications, block text messages, and track mobile telephones. Recently it has acquired technology to track satellite phones, and by extension, journalists. The SEA used spyware to infiltrate journalists' personal computers and get access to passwords and information on their sources, as well as to disseminate false information. Beyond harassment, the regime tortured activists, bloggers, and citizen journalists to obtain the passwords to their social-media accounts.

The government and allied businessmen 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. Although the government opened up space for private print media in 2001, 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 media are virtually nonexistent. Only the government controls and disseminates domestic and foreign political news and analysis, especially through television networks and FM radio. Television and radio broadcasting is, in general, controlled by the state. The private Shams TV tried to extend its programming beyond entertainment by covering news in 2012, but its journalists were targeted throughout the year. A National Council of Information was established under the new media law to regulate the information sector. Among other duties, it will set up conditions for licenses, issue them to private media outlets, and specify rules on funding. There was little evidence that the council had begun enforcing such rules in 2012, but it did set advertising limits that will further strain economic support for independent outlets.

Approximately 24 percent of Syrians accessed the internet in 2012, and social-media websites and communication tools such as Skype are increasingly used to transmit information. The government shut down the internet across the country for three days in November. Though this was not the first time the government had enforced an internet blackout, previous instances had been restricted to certain parts of the country. The November blackout was the first to affect nationwide access to the internet and, in some cases, mobile networks.

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