

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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> Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment, please email the [Knowledge and Information Management Unit](#).

11 January 2013

SYR104276.FE

Syria: Situation of bloggers (Internet) in Syria and their treatment by the authorities (2011-2012)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Government Control of the Internet

According to several sources, the Syrian government controls the Internet network (*Le Figaro* 15 Sept. 2011; *La Montagne* 6 Jan. 2013; US 24 May 2012, 14). In 2011, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) stated that two government organizations, the Syrian Information Organization (SIO) and the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE), control the Internet (RSF 11 March 2011). According to the RSF, [RSF English version] "[t]he STE and SIO use Thundercache software to maintain a centralised control over the Web. The programme provides online website monitoring and filtering by spotting key 'banned' words" (ibid.). Moreover, according to *France 24*, there is only one Internet provider in Syria: the STE, a government-controlled company (*France 24* 29 Nov. 2012). The RSF indicated that, in 2011, the government blocked more than 240 sites, namely the sites of opposition parties, independent information sites, social network sites, and blogs (RSF 11 Mar. 2011). *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011*, published by the US Department of State, and *Le Monde* also reported that sites had been blocked (US 24 May 2012, 14; *Le Monde* 27 Jan. 2011). Sources also noted that there have been several interruptions in Internet service or "black-outs" in Syria in November 2011 (*France 24* 29 Nov. 2012; US 24 May 2012, 14) and in November 2012 (AP 29 Nov. 2012; *Equal Times* 30 Nov. 2012; *Le Nouvel Observateur* 29 Nov. 2012; *Citizen Lab* 15 Dec. 2012). According to a study on Internet filtering conducted by the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, "[t]he government claimed that it was due to technical problems, but the incident was seen by the international community as a way of blocking reports on the current conflict" (ibid.). Cited in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, a network expert stated that the government had probably cut all access to the Internet in November 2012 (*Le Nouvel Observateur* 29 Nov. 2012). To this, the Syrian Department of Information replied: [translation] "Terrorists cut the Internet" (ibid.).

The World Report published by the RSF in 2011 stated the following:

[RSF English version]

The Web is monitored particularly closely, with the cyber-army recruited by the government playing a bigger and bigger role. Pro-Assad propaganda, the spread of false information, the hacking of email and social networking accounts, phishing etc-a veritable information and disinformation war is being waged in Syria. (RSF 1 Sept. 2011)

According to the report, Syria is on the RSF's list of "Internet Enemies" and President Bashar al-Assad is considered to be one of the world's 38 predators of press freedom (ibid.).

2. Bloggers

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) indicated that, based on the number of victims in 2012, Syria was at the top of the list of the most dangerous countries for journalists, with 36 journalists and media personnel killed (31 Dec. 2012). According to the RSF, [RSF English version] "[m]any Syrian journalists and bloggers have been arrested and tortured" (RSF 1 Sept. 2011). Amnesty International also indicated that, since the start of the demonstrations supporting the reform, thousands have been detained and tortured, including journalists and bloggers (AI 6 Dec. 2011).

Global Voices Advocacy, a site in Global Voices' global network of bloggers dedicated to protecting freedom of expression online to fighting cyber-censorship, also noted that many bloggers and journalists had been detained in 2011 (29 Oct. 2011). Sources reported that Syrian blogger Razan Ghazzawi was arrested on 4 December 2011 by the Syrian authorities at the border between Syria and Jordan (*Le Nouvel Observateur* 5 Dec. 2011; *Blogueurs sans frontières* 5 Dec. 2011; AI 6 Dec. 2011). She was on her way to Amman to attend a workshop on media freedom in the Arab world (*ibid.*; *Le Nouvel Observateur* 5 Dec. 2011).

Citing a Syrian activist who was imprisoned twice in Damascus, Global Voices Advocacy wrote that [Global Voices English version]

"the Syrian regime has performed a vicious crackdown against bloggers and social activists inside Syria. Those compromised and detained for such 'acts of crime' are subjected to unbelievable hostility and usually tortured severely." (29 Oct. 2011)

According to an RSF article, the blogger Razan Ghazzawi and Mazen Darwish, President of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression, along with 12 other people, including employees at the Centre, journalists and bloggers, were arrested on 16 February 2012 (RSF 16 Feb. 2012). The blogger and five other activists were released on 18 February 2012 (*ibid.* 22 Feb. 2012). According to an article published on 11 December 2012 by the Union de la presse francophone (UPF), Mazen Darwish and four other journalists were still being detained (UPF 11 Dec. 2012).

The following is an incomplete list published by the RSF in May 2012 of the many bloggers who have been detained or who have disappeared in Syria:

[RSF English version]

- Jamal Al-Omar, a blogger arrested at the Lebanese border on 15 March [2012]. He was reportedly transferred recently to Deraa prison with a view to trying him before a military court.
- Jihad Jamal, a blogger arrested ... on 7 March [2012] in Damascus.
- Deyaa Labdalla, a blogger arrested in Suweida on 13 February [2012] for sending an open letter to President Assad.

...

- Qais Abazli, a blogger who was arrested [on 18 November 2011] near Jisr Al-Shoughour. He created the "Anti-corruption Syrians" blog.

...

- Miral Biroreda, an activist, writer and blogger who was arrested during a peaceful demonstration in Al-Hassakah on 26 August 2011. According to the Kurdish Organization for the Defence of Human Rights and Civil Liberties (DAD), he is to be tried on 15 May [2012] for participating in demonstrations and writing about the Syrian revolution.

...

- Firaz Akram Mahmoud, a blogger who was arrested arbitrarily in an Internet café in Homs on 5 February 2011.
- Ahmed Ben Farhan Al-Alawi, a blogger arrested on 28 October 2010.
- Ahmed Ben Abdel Halim Aboush, a blogger held since 20 July 2010. He was previously held for six years, until freed on a presidential pardon on 2 November 2005.
- Tal Al-Mallouhi, a blogger who was 18 when she was arrested in December 2009. A state security court in Damascus sentenced her to five years in prison on 14 February 2012 on a charge of exchanging "intelligence with a foreign country" (RSF 12 May 2012).

Additional information on detained bloggers could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints for this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Date modified: 2016-01-05