

Syria

In addition to filtering a range of Web content, the Syrian government monitors Internet use closely and has detained citizens “for expressing their opinions or reporting information online.”¹ Vague and broadly worded laws invite government abuse and have prompted Internet users to engage in self-censoring and self-monitoring to avoid the state’s ambiguous grounds for arrest.²



Background

Syria is among the most repressive countries in the world with regard to freedom of expression and information. Criticisms of the president and reports on the problems of religious and ethnic minorities in Syria remain particularly sensitive topics.³ Human rights organizations have reported exhaustively on political arrests and detentions.⁴

In 2006 Reporters Without Borders ranked Syria among the thirteen “enemies of the Internet.”⁵ Although the government does recognize the importance of the Internet as a source of economic growth, it also admits to automatically blocking pornographic Web sites⁶ and to

censoring “pro-Israel and hyper-Islamist” Web sites, such as “those run by the illegal Muslim Brotherhood, and those calling for autonomy for Syrian Kurds.”⁷ In defense of these practices, Minister of Technology and Communications Amr Salem said, “Syria is currently under attack ... and if somebody writes, or publishes or whatever, something that supports the attack, they will be tried.”⁸

Internet in Syria

With a literacy rate of 80 percent,⁹ Syria’s main barriers to Internet access are economic. Only 4.2 percent of the population own personal computers, with just 1 percent of Syrians

RESULTS AT A GLANCE					
Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political					●
Social			●		
Conflict/security			●		
Internet tools				●	
Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable	
Transparency		●			
Consistency			●		

KEY INDICATORS



Source (by indicator): World Bank 2005, 2006a, 2006a; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2005

subscribing to Internet services.¹⁰ The proliferation of Internet cafés¹¹ has helped raise the Internet penetration rate to approximately 6 percent,¹² but many Syrians still find the cost of these cafés prohibitive.¹³

In recent years, the government has endeavored to expand Internet access by installing hardware and telecommunications capabilities in schools, by subsidizing the cost of personal computers, and, most recently, by fostering competition among Internet service providers (ISPs).¹⁴

There are four ISPs that are neither owned nor funded by the government. Still, the two government-affiliated ISPs,¹⁵ Syria Telecommunication Establishment (STE) and SCS-net (now Aoolaa), continue to occupy the majority of the market.¹⁶ Aya, one of the privately owned ISPs, has close ties to the government.¹⁷

Legal and regulatory frameworks

In addition to maintaining regulatory control over ISPs, the Syrian government imposes financial and technical constraints on Internet users. Syrian Internet subscribers wishing to use ports other than port 80—the port most often used for Web browsing—must apply for a special service

and pay a small monthly fee.¹⁸ Aya and other ISPs offer plans that allow users to access the Internet with a fixed IP address, which is necessary to host sites, to use Virtual Private Networks, and to bypass the ISP's proxy server. They may also pay for a special plan that allows them to open otherwise blocked ports, such as those used for Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and video chat.¹⁹

Points of Internet access are also strictly regulated and sometimes monitored. To open an Internet café an owner must obtain a license from the Telecommunications Department's office in the local governorate. To acquire a license, the owner must follow the regulations in the Conditions Manual, which include specifications on the spacing between computers.²⁰ Though users at Internet cafés are not required to show ID or give their names, some Syrians have reported that plainclothes officials watch Internet cafés and take note of the users.²¹

The Constitution of the Arab Republic of Syria affords every citizen “the right to freely and openly express his views in words, in writing, and through all other means of expression,” while also guaranteeing “the freedom of the press, of printing, and publication in accordance with the

law.”²² In actuality, these freedoms are limited by other legislative provisions. Article 4(b) of the 1963 Emergency Law authorizes the government to monitor all publications and communications.²³ That law also allows the government to arrest those who commit “crimes which constitute an overall hazard” or other vaguely defined offenses.²⁴

The Press Law of 2001 subjects all print media—from newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals to books, pamphlets, and posters—to government control and censorship.²⁵ Printing “falsehoods” or “fabricated reports” is a criminal offense under the Press Law, and writing on topics relevant to “national security [or] national unity” is forbidden.²⁶ Violators may be penalized with hefty monetary fines, lengthy prison terms, or license suspensions or revocations.²⁷ Furthermore, “periodicals that are not licensed as political publications [are prohibited] from publishing ‘political’ articles”—a provision that “amounts to blanket government censorship.”²⁸ Thus, although the Internet has facilitated access to unofficial information, that information is limited by the controls and threats codified in Syrian law.

The government has demonstrated its willingness to punish Syrians for writing and transmitting information online.²⁹ Authorities have detained individuals for e-mailing an image or article produced by another party, for voicing complaints about the government, and for posting original photographs of police crackdowns on the Web.³⁰ These incidents have engendered caution and self-censorship across the Syrian Internet as a whole and within the Syrian blogosphere, which nonetheless continues to grow and to become more vibrant.³¹

ONI testing results

Testing was conducted on one of the main ISPs in Syria, Alooda (formally SCS-Net). Although the tests indicate that Syria now blocks fewer Web

sites than it has in the past, many sites remain blocked.

The Web site of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, www.jimsyr.com, was blocked, though the Web site of the Egyptian branch, the region’s largest, was available. Two Kurdish Web sites, www.tirej.net and www.amude.net, were blocked, as was the Web site of the United States Committee for a Free Lebanon (www.freelebanon.org), which campaigns for an end to Syrian influence in Lebanese politics. The Arabic- and English-language sites of the unrecognized Reform Party of Syria were filtered, along with the Web sites of the *Hizb al-Tahrir* (Liberation Party)—an Islamist group that seeks to restore the Caliphate and that remains banned in many countries.

ONI’s tests found that 115 Syrian blogs hosted on Google’s popular blogging engine, www.blogspot.com, were blocked, strongly suggesting that the ISP had blocked access to all blogs hosted on this service, including many apolitical blogs. www.freesyria.wordpress.com, a blog created to campaign for the release of Michel Kilo, a prominent Syrian journalist imprisoned for his writings, was also blocked.

In the past, Syria has reportedly filtered access to popular e-mail sites. ONI testing found www.hotmail.com to be blocked, along with two, relatively small Web-based e-mail sites, www.address.com and www.netaddress.com. None of the Arabic-language e-mail sites ONI tested were blocked, though the Arabic-language hosting site www.khayma.com was.

Nearly one-third of the anonymizer sites tested were blocked, indicating some measure of effort to preempt circumvention.

Though most foreign news sites were accessible, Web sites of some important Arabic newspapers and news portals were found to be blocked. Examples include the pan Arab, London-based, Arabic-language newspapers, *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (www.al-quds.co.uk) and *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, (www.asharqalawsat.com),

the news portal www.elaph.com, the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al Seyassah* (www.alseyassah.com), the U.S.-based Web site of the *Arab Times* (www.arabtimes.com), and the Islamically oriented news and information portal www.islamonline.net. These publications frequently run articles critical of the Syrian government.

Web sites of human rights organizations were generally available. Sites associated with the London-based Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) marked an important exception; all URLs on the www.shrc.org.uk domain were found blocked in this round of testing. As indicated above, some blogs that criticize the human rights record of Syria were also blocked.

Only three Web sites of the Web sites tested with pornographic content were blocked: www.playboy.com, www.sex.com, and www.netarabic.com/vb (this last is a message board with pornographic content).

Web sites that focus on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered issues were generally available. One site, www.gaywired.com, was an exception.

Unfortunately, an insufficient number of Israeli Web sites were tested to confirm whether or not Syria blocks the entire “.il” domain, as past reports have suggested.³² However, the fact that the Institute for Counter Terrorism’s Israeli Web site (www.ict.org.il) was blocked—while the Institute’s alternate URL (www.instituteforcounterterrorism.org), lacking the “.il” suffix, was not—lends credence to such reports. Furthermore, the Web site for the World Zionist organization (www.wzo.org.il) was blocked.

Conclusion

The Web sites blocked in Syria span a range of categories, with the most substantial filtering occurring among sites that criticize government policies and actions or espouse oppositional political views. Repressive legislation and the imprisonment of journalists and online writers for their activities online have led many Syrians to

engage in self-censorship. Meanwhile, the government continues to promote the growth of the Internet throughout the country.

NOTES

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 17. Human Rights Watch, False Freedom: Online Censorship in the Middle East and North Africa: Syria, November 2005, <http://hrw.org/reports/2005/mena1105/>.
 18. OpenNet Initiative interview with a Syrian computer consultant who requested anonymity, November 13, 2006.
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