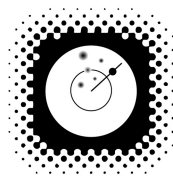**Internet Filtering in**

Syria

OpenNet Initiative

Overview

The Syrian government has expanded the range of the Web content it filters, continues to detain citizens for expressing their opinions online, and monitors Internet use closely. Broadly worded laws invite government harassment and have prompted Internet users to engage in self-censorship and self-monitoring to avoid the state's ambiguous grounds for arrest.

Background

In Syria, the media is primarily owned and controlled by the government and the ruling Baath party. Criticism of the president and his family is not allowed, journalists practice self-censorship, and foreign reporters rarely get accreditation.[1] Though there have been improvements in Syrian press freedom since President Bashar al-Assad became president in 2000,[2] the state continues to use the ongoing state of emergency to arrest media workers.[3] Journalists and political activists risk arrest at any time for virtually any reason and are "up against a whimsical and vengeful state apparatus which continually adds to the list of things banned or forbidden to be mentioned."[4] Syrian journalists have been arrested for interviewing exiled regime opponents, participating in conferences abroad and for criticizing government policies.[5]

In 2006, Reporters Without Borders ranked Syria among the thirteen "enemies of the Internet,"[6] and in 2007 it described Syria as the biggest prison for cyber-dissidents in the Middle East because of the number of arrests and mistreatments of online activists.[7] In 2009, the Committee to Protect Journalists named Syria number three in a list of the ten worst countries in which to be a blogger, given the arrests, harassments and restrictions which online writers in Syria have faced .[8]

The government admits 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.[9] In defense of these practices, former Minister of Technology and Communications Amr Salem has said that "Syria is currently under attack ... and if somebody writes, or publishes or whatever, something that supports the attack, they will be tried."[10]

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

		worst	best
GNI per capita, PPP (current international $)	3,808		
Life expectancy at birth (years)	73.6		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+)	80.8		
Human development index (out of 177)	108		
Rule of law (percentile)	37		
Voice and accountability (percentile)	5		
Digital opportunity index (out of 181)	104		
Internet users (% of population)	17.4		

Internet in Syria

The telecommunications market is Syria is the most regulated in the Middle East and is among the least developed. State-owned Syrian Telecom (STE) owns all telecommunications infrastructure and has made some substantial investment to bring services to rural areas, but limited competition exists with private ISPs competing with STE in the Internet provision market. [11]

STE, a government body that is part of the Ministry of Telecommunications and Technology, is also the regulator of telecommunications in Syria, and in addition to being an ISP, it enjoys a monopoly over wired and wireless services provided anywhere in Syria.[12] Telecom providers in Syria include Syriatel,[13] MTN,[14] Aya,[15] and SCS-net, which is the ISP arm of the Syrian Computer Society.[16] Additionally, MTN and Syriatel now offer 3G mobile broadband in four major cities, as well as EDGE and GPRS connectivity (WAP) across the country.[17] 3G, however, is prohibitively expensive for most Syrians at nearly USD 50 per month.

The Internet was introduced to the general public in Syria in 2000 as part of the modernizing reforms of President Bashar al-Assad. In the subsequent seven years, Internet use soared by 4,900 percent, far exceeding the global growth rate of 249 percent. The Internet penetration rate as of 2008 was 16.8 percent.[18] The vast majority of Syrian users get online at Syria's ubiquitous Internet cafés, and from houses using dial-up connections via landlines.[19] Syrian users continue to access blocked Web sites using proxies and circumvention tools, and prefer to use Internet cafés to browse banned content because, they believe, government can monitor Web surfing through home Internet connections.[20]

Legal and regulatory frameworks

The constitution of Syria provides for freedom of speech and of the press, but the Syrian government restricts press freedom with repressive laws such as the Emergency Law which was put in place December 1962 and broadly mandates the censorship of various forms of communication; the 2001 Press Law which sets out sweeping controls over publications printed in Syria; articles 286 and 287 of the penal code which criminalize spreading news abroad; and Decree No. 6 of 1965 criminalizes "publishing news aimed at shaking the people's confidence in the revolution."[21]

The Syrian authorities extended their censorship of Internet activities and monitoring of Internet users in March 2008 by ordering Internet café users to provide their names, identification cards,

and the times they use the Internet café to Internet café owners, who will subsequently present them to the authorities.[22] The head of the Syrian Media Center told Reuters, "These steps are designed to terrorize Internet users and spread fear and self-censorship in violation of the right to privacy and free expression."[23] Government officials said these measures were necessary to guard against what they described as attempts to spread sectarian divisions and "penetration by Israel."[24]

On the other hand, an increasing number of Syrians have faced trials or have been jailed for their online writings, and the Syrian authorities continue judicial persecution of cyber-dissidents. For example, Habib Saleh was tried in December 2008 for publishing articles calling for democracy in Syria on the Web site Elaph.com, a Web site that is censored in Syria, and was given a three-year prison sentence in March 2009. Saleh was convicted under article 285 of the criminal code of "weakening national sentiment," a charge that is applicable only in wartime, said his lawyer.[25] In the same vein, blogger Tariq Biasi received a three-year sentence for "weakening national sentiment" as well as "publishing false information" on his blog.[26]

In addition, owners of opposition Web sites face harassment by the authorities. For example, lawyer and Web site editor Abdallah Souleiman Ali was detained for 12 days for "persisting in publishing legal and political articles criticizing the role of the government" in his Web site Al Nazaha (alnazaha.org) in July 2008.[27]

Access to the social networking Web site Facebook was blocked in November 2007 as part of a crackdown on political activism on the Internet because, as a women's rights advocate believes, it helped Syrian civil society form civic groups outside government control.[28] The government however, said Facebook was blocked because it could become a conduit for Israeli penetration of Syrian youth.[29] According to advocacy group the Syrian Media Center, at least 153 Internet sites have been blocked, among which are Blogger (owned by Google), the Arabic blogging host service Maktoob, YouTube, and Web sites of opposition parties, Lebanese newspapers and Lebanese groups opposed to "Syrian interference in Lebanon."[30] In September 2008, the Public Institution for Telecommunication ordered the blocking of the entire Web site of the Cairo-based Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) as well as their blogs (www.katib.org). Prior to that, only a page on ANHRI's site containing information about human rights violations in Syria was blocked. ANHRI believes this blocking was ordered by the security forces, "which have a louder voice than the law and the Constitution in Syria."[31]

Internet cafés in Syria are subject to tough measures which make opening one very difficult. To start an Internet café, one needs to get a license from the Syrian Telecommunications Institution and a security license from the Interior Ministry that sets security instructions, including requiring each café visitor to provide his/her name, ID, and the names of his or her mother and father.[32] The café owner must show visitors which religious and political websites they are banned from using.[33] Failure to follow the rules can result in closure of the café, large fines, and in extreme cases, jail time.[34]

Surveillance
STE states on its Web site that the telecommunications it provides remain private and shall not be shared except by law and regulations at an official request.[35] However, café operators have reported that the authorities ask them to

spy on the customers and that they believe everything is monitored.[36] A young cyber-dissident who was arrested at an Internet café in Damascus in late 2006 for his critical online writings said security services often ask café owners to spy on clients, providing them with software programs for the task.[37] And, as mentioned above, Internet café operators must keep a record of their clients' names and IDs as well as when they use the Internet, to present to the authorities on request. Furthermore, Syria-based Web sites were ordered by the government in 2007 to reveal the identity and name of those behind any article or comment they publish.[38]

The Interior Ministry and the Syrian Telecommunications Institution have banned the sale of mobile phones that have global positioning systems (GPS) and have wireless application protocol (WAP) services that are not being properly monitored by the service providers.[39]

Technical censorship in Syria is implemented using software from a Canadian company called Platinum Inc.[40] The company uses ThunderCache solution for URL filtering and, as the product's Web page suggests, the system is capable of monitoring and controlling a user's dynamic Web-based activities as well as conducting deep packet inspection.[41]

ONI testing results
Testing was conducted on two ISPs in Syria, SCS-Net (also known as Aloola) and Aya. ONI testing results indicate that Syria's Internet filtering regime has increased the scope and depth of targeted content. Censorship has been extended to include high profile sites such as the video sharing Web site YouTube, the social networking Web site Facebook, and the online shop Amazon.com.

Political filtering continues to be pervasive. For example, Web sites of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood such as ikhwansyria.com and jimsyr.com (now defunct) were blocked. Unlike results from 2006-2007, more Web sites affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, including that of the Egyptian branch, were blocked. Examples include www.ikhwanonline.com, www.ikhwanweb.com, and www.ikhwan.net.
Results from 2006-2007 testing indicated that only two Kurdish Web sites were blocked, but results from 2008-2009 testing show that several Kurdish Web sites have been added to the blocked sites. These include www.kurdnas.com, amude.net, www.kurdistanabinxete.com, www.pajk-online.com, www.kurdmedya.com, and www.kurdax.net.

Also blocked were the Web site of the United States Committee for a Free Lebanon (freelebanon.org), which campaigns for an end to Syrian influence in Lebanese politics, the Web site of the Lebanese Forces (www.lebanese-forces.org), and some Lebanese newspapers such as www.annahar.com.

Several political Web sites were also filtered. Among them are the Web site of the Reform Party of Syria (www.reformsyria.org), a Web site of a communist party in Syria (www.syriaalaan.com), the Web site of the Hizb al-Tahrir or Liberation Party (www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org) —an Islamist group that seeks to restore the Caliphate, and various news and oppositional Web sites such as www.thisissyria.net, www.free-syria.com, and www.syriatruth.org.

ONI testing found that a number of Syrian blogs hosted on Google's popular blogging engine, Blogger (blogspot.com), continue to be blocked, strongly suggesting that ISPs have blocked access to all blogs hosted on this service, including many apolitical blogs.

Interestingly enough, Blogger.com (the site from which users of the service write posts) is not blocked, meaning Syrian users can blog, but cannot read blogs (including their own).

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.

ONI results confirmed that Syria has unblocked access to the popular e-mail site www.hotmail.com as well as the small Web-based e-mail sites address.com and netaddress.com. All three sites were found to be blocked in previous rounds of testing. None of the Arabic-language e-mail sites ONI tested were blocked, though the Arabic-language hosting site www.khayma.com was. Among the few Web sites found unblocked since 2006-2007 testing were the localized Arabic version of Wikipedia and the Web site of the Lebanese Free Patriotic Movement (http://www.tayyar.org).

Though most foreign news sites were accessible, Web sites of some prominent 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 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 Islam Online (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) and the Web site of the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights (www.syriahr.com) were notable

exceptions. As indicated above, some blogs that criticize the human rights record of Syria were also blocked.

Several Israeli Web sites were tested to confirm whether or not Syria blocks the entire ".il" domain. All tested Web sites within the domain were blocked, suggesting that the entire domain is indeed blocked. URLs containing the keyword "Israel" were also found to be blocked.

Nearly one-third of the anonymizer sites tested were blocked, indicating some measure of effort to preempt circumvention. None of the sites containing pornographic content were found to be blocked, including the select few found blocked in 2006-2007 testing. Additionally, as in 2006-2007 rounds of testing, Web sites that focus on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered issues were generally available.

The ISPs in Syria offer an optional filtering system to block content deemed immoral, violent, and chatting Web sites. ONI did not test the scope and depth of these optional systems.

Filtering continues to lack transparency; there is no explicit block page and the ISPs and telecom regulators do not publish clear information about what they filter.

Conclusion

In addition to high profile Web sites such as YouTube, Amazon.com, and Facebook, the Web sites blocked in Syria span a range of categories, with the most substantial filtering being of sites that criticize government policies and actions or espouse oppositional political views. Repressive legislation and the imprisonment of journalists and bloggers 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.

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