



Freedom House UPR Stakeholder Submission - Syria

Introduction

1. Freedom House submits this report to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to be considered for inclusion in the summary of stakeholder submissions for the Universal Periodic Review of the Arab Republic of **Syria**, scheduled to take place in October 2011.

Syria's Permanent Emergency Status Violates International Law

2. Syria remains on Freedom House's list of the 'Worst of the Worst' human rights abusers and ranks as "not free" in terms of civil and political liberties. Syrians have been living under an Emergency Law (Legislative Decree No. 51 dated 11/22/1962, which included a law on the state of emergency) since the eight of March 1963 after a military coup.

3. Syria is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which commits it to ensure respect for basic freedoms of association and expression. However, these and other fundamental rights are effectively suspended under the state's emergency legislation. Article 4 of the ICCPR permits states to derogate from certain rights guaranteed by the Covenant only in "times of public emergency." Any measures derogating from obligations under the ICCPR must be limited to the extent required by the exigencies of the situation, and must be announced by the state party to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. Neither of these conditions has been met by the Syrian Emergency Law or the Syrian government.

4. Since President Assad assumed power in 2000, there have been no serious attempts to rescind the imposed state of emergency. At the tenth Regional Conference of the ruling Baath Arab Socialist Party in June 2005, recommendations were made to review the emergency law and limit its provisions, but none of those recommendations were implemented.

Emergency Status Is the Main Pretext for Serious Human Rights Abuses

5. Syrian authorities deny its citizens a broad spectrum of fundamental rights and freedoms set forth in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

6. Under the state of emergency, security services apparatuses (the state security, political security, military security, air-force intelligence), which maintain branch offices in cities throughout the country, are given unrestricted authorities. They summon, interrogate and detain citizens for indefinite periods of time, and subject them to various kinds of torture and ill-treatment. In addition to that, they monitor the activities of citizens, ranging from personal matters to public activities; cultural, political or social. The security services adopt martial and administrative decisions as a substitute for normal laws. The state of emergency has been

used to exert significant control over all aspects of the lives of Syrians, starting from getting a job which requires security approval, and ending with any activity in the political, cultural, and social spheres.

Use of Arbitrary Detention and Torture

7. Under the state of emergency, security agencies (state security, political security, military security, and air-force intelligence) enjoy unrestricted authority to arbitrarily detain people and sometimes conceal the location of detainees for indefinite periods of time. The number of arbitrary-arrested detainees in Syria is estimated to be almost three thousand people, and they are held in various prisons and security branches. Conditions in Syrian prisons and detention center are very poor; prisoners are subject to torture, overcrowding, abuse, and a lack of sanitation, hygiene, and medical care.

8. Syrian Human rights organizations reported four cases of death under torture in the prisons and interrogation offices in 2010. Muhammad Mesto Rashid, Abdulkader Mahmoud, Riaz Ahmed Khalil, and Hammam Walid Rukayah died under torture in the security branches in 2010. The Syrian authorities refused to deliver the bodies to the families and no investigations were initiated.

9. Exceptional laws also protect perpetrators of crimes of torture and other violations. Article 16 of Legislative Decree No. 14 1969, states that prosecuting any member of the Department [Secret services] for crimes committed during the execution of specific tasks entrusted to them, or when initiating them, is only possible upon a prosecution order issued by the Director.

10. Article 74 of Legislative Decree No. 549 Date of 1969, states that contractors or those who are employed at the Department of State Security, may not be prosecuted by the judiciary system, in crimes arising from the nature of their work or in the course of performing it, before being referred to the Disciplinary Board.

11. In September 2008, President Bashar Al Assad issued a Legislative Decree No. 64, granting Police officers and the Moukhabart immunity for crimes committed by them while performing the tasks entrusted to them. A prosecution is only possible by a decision of the General Command of the Army and Armed forces.

Violations of Freedoms of Association

12. While Article 39 of the Syrian Constitution guarantees the rights of the citizens to assemble and demonstrate peacefully, in practice these freedoms are restricted by the Emergency Law. The Emergency Law grants the Syrian police apparatus the power to impose restrictions on freedom of assembly. Security forces have the power to prevent and disrupt peaceful opposition demonstrations, arrest participants, and physically abuse them on site and while in custody.

13. In February 2011, security forces used the powers accorded to them by the Emergency Law to prevent peaceful citizen to demonstrate in front of the Libyan embassy in Damascus. The security forces violently dispersed protesters who were peacefully demonstrating, detaining 14 citizens. The 14 protesters were released the same day.

14. Syrian authorities continue to refuse to license independent non-governmental organizations. Human rights organizations are subject to continuous harassment and threats by the security forces. Anwar al-Bunni is serving five years in prison because of his human rights work. Human rights lawyer, Muhannad al-Hassani, was arrested in 2009 and sentenced to three years in prison due to his human rights activism and his activities monitoring trials at the Supreme State Security Court.

15. The situation is similar for political parties. It is illegal to establish political parties independent from the National Progressive Front led and controlled by the Baath Party. Article 306 of the Syrian Penal Code is used to sentence political activists on the charge of "joining a secret society aimed at changing the structure of the state."

16. In May 2009, the State Security Court sentenced five members of the Communist Labor Party to five to seven years in prison on the charge of belonging to a secret society. Four of them -- Abbas Abbas, Ahmed Al-Nihawi, Ghassan Hasan, and Tawfiq Imrana -- are still serving their terms. The fifth -- Hasan Zahra -- is suffering from a terminal illness and was released in June 2010. These individuals had been subject to arrest and imprisonment in the eighties and nineties for their political activities.

17. Decree No. 49 of 1980 mandated capital punishment for those refusing to withdraw their membership to the Muslim Brotherhood. The hard line position taken by the authorities against the Muslim Brotherhood since the late 1980s is reflected through the continued enforcement of the Law Number 49. Although the implementation of the death penalty has been frozen for years, prison sentences of over ten years for members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood are common.¹

Violations of the Right to Movement

18. The right to travel is guaranteed by Syrian laws unless based on judicial decisions. The Emergency Law grants to the Syrian police wide authorities to ban thousands of citizens from leaving Syria based on security orders. The banning targets political opponents, human rights activists, former detainees, and intellectuals.²

Violations of Freedom of Speech

19. The Emergency Law allows arrest for acts such as insulting the president and expressing an opinion contrary to the opinion of the ruling regime. Independent journalists, bloggers, and human rights activists are subject to strict censorship and called periodically by the security forces for investigation. Official local media is under absolute control of security services; private media is subject to strict censorship and forced to comply with limitations imposed by the regime.

20. In 2007 two Syrian bloggers (Kareem Arbaji and Tariq Biasi) were sentenced by the Syrian Supreme State Security Court to three years in prison because of articles, poem, and comments published online.

¹ Can Extraordinary Courts Ensure Justice: The Supreme State Security Court, Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies (DCHRS), May 2007.

² Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, The problem of the travel ban in Syria, http://scm.bz/?page=show_det&category_id=83&id=124&lang=ar

21. In 2009, Ma'an A'akel a journalist working at the state owned news paper Al-Thawra was arrested and disappeared until the date of his release in February 2010. Prior to his arrest the journalist was working on an investigative report dealing with the subject of corruption in Syria.

22. In 2010, Syrian journalist and political activist Ali al-Abdullah was re-detained by the security forces and is facing a military court due to a press statement he made in prison while serving a sentence of two and half years.

Violations of Rule of Law and Independence of the Judiciary

23. Articles 131 and 133 of the Syrian Constitution guarantee the independence of the judiciary system and emphasize that judges are independent and not subject to any authority except that of the law. Nevertheless, Syria lacks an independent judiciary. The ordinary courts are subject to the control of the executive branch, as the Supreme Judicial Council is headed by the President represented by the Minister of Justice.

24. In addition, the judiciary system lacks the minimum degree of autonomy and is under the absolute command of the security services. The judicial system does not guarantee due process and is subject to widespread corruption.³

25. Under the state of emergency, Syria operates an exceptional court: the Supreme State Security Court. Established by Legislative Decree No. 47 dated 28/03/1968, the Court is granted broad powers and is exempt from complying with Syrian due process laws and standards. Its verdicts are not subject to any form of appeal or review.

26. Hearings at the Supreme State Security Court continue to be secret and lawyers are not allowed to meet their clients in private. The court relies entirely on affidavits signed under coercion. The court lacks the minimum standards for fair trial and hundreds of prisoners are tried before it each year.

27. The state of emergency allows military courts to try civilians. Most political prisoners have been tried before the military court. Kamal Labwani who is already serving a 12 years sentence was sentenced to three years in prison by the Military Court for spreading false news in the prison. Human rights activist Haitham Al-Maleh was sentenced by the same court to three years in prison for the same charges. He was released in March 2011 by a presidential amnesty, after having served approximately two years in prison under harsh conditions.

³ In 2006, the Syrian judicial system sentenced signatories of the Damascus-Beirut Declaration, which called for normal relations and respect for the sovereignty of both countries, to periods ranging between three to five years. Twelve democratic activists were also arrested in December 2007 for holding the meeting of the National Council that prepared the Damascus Declaration for Democratic and Peaceful Change and were sentenced to two and half years in prison.

Recommendations

- The government of Syria should immediately repeal the Emergency Law
- The Supreme State Security Court should be fully and publicly disbanded.
- The government of Syria should acknowledge and investigate prior violations of political freedoms, civil liberties, and human rights.
- The government of Syria should release all political prisoners immediately.
- The government of Syria must embrace international standards on human rights and allow for better public monitoring
- Syria's courts should guarantee that all accused are accorded with due process of law that complies with international standards
- Syria should immediately end the practice of banning citizens from traveling
- Syria should immediately respect the rights to free speech, free association, and free assembly

Attachments

[Freedom in the World 2010: Syria](#)

[Freedom of the Press 2010: Syria](#)

[Worst of the Worst 2010: Syria](#)

Freedom in the World - Syria (2010)

Capital: Damascus Political Rights Score: 7 *

Population: Civil Liberties Score: 6 *

21,906,000 Status: Not Free

Overview

Freedoms of expression, association, and assembly remained tightly restricted throughout 2009, especially with regard to certain groups, such as the Kurdish minority. Syria's opposition in exile split during the year, ending an uneasy alliance between secularists and Islamists. On the international front, Syria and Lebanon exchanged ambassadors, and although the United States announced that it would send an ambassador to Damascus, none had been named by year's end.

The modern state of Syria was established by the French after World War I and gained formal independence in 1946. Democratic institutions functioned intermittently until the Arab Socialist Baath Party seized power in a 1963 coup and transformed Syria into a one-party state governed under emergency law. During the 1960s, power shifted from civilian ideologues to army officers, most of whom belonged to Syria's Alawite minority (adherents of an Islamic sect who make up 12 percent of the population). This trend culminated in General Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970.

The regime cultivated a base of support that spanned sectarian and ethnic divisions, but relied on Alawite domination of the security establishment and the suppression of dissent. In 1982, government forces stormed the northern city of Hama to crush a rebellion by the opposition Muslim Brotherhood, killing as many as 20,000 insurgents and civilians.

Bashar al-Assad took power after his father's death in 2000, pledging to liberalize Syria's politics and economy. The first six months of his presidency featured the release of political prisoners, the return of exiled dissidents, and open discussion of the country's problems. In February 2001, however, the regime abruptly halted this so-called Damascus Spring. Leading reformists were arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms, while others faced constant surveillance and intimidation by the secret police. Economic reform fell by the wayside, and Syria under Bashar al-Assad proved resistant to political

change.

Reinvigorated by the toppling of Iraq's Baathist regime in 2003, Syria's secular and Islamist dissidents began cooperating and pushing for the release of political prisoners, the cancellation of the state of emergency, and the legalization of opposition parties. Syria's Kurdish minority erupted into eight days of rioting in March 2004. At least 30 people were killed as security forces suppressed the riots and made some 2,000 arrests.

Despite hints that sweeping political reforms would be drafted at a major Baath Party conference in 2005, no substantial measures were taken. In October 2005, representatives of all three segments of the opposition—the Islamists, the Kurds, and secular liberals—signed the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change (DDDNC), which called for the country's leaders to step down and endorsed a broad set of liberal democratic principles.

In May 2006, exiled opposition leaders announced the creation of the National Salvation Front (NSF) to bring about regime change. Also that month, a number of Syrian political and human rights activists signed the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, which called for a change in Syrian-Lebanese relations and the recognition of Lebanese sovereignty. Many of the signatories were subsequently detained or sentenced to prison as part of a renewed crackdown that reversed the previous partial leniency on personal freedom. In 2007, al-Assad won another term as president with 97.6 percent of the vote. In results that were similarly preordained by the electoral framework, the ruling Baath-dominated coalition won the majority of seats in that year's parliamentary and municipal polls. Meanwhile, supporters of the DDDNC formed governing bodies for their alliance and renewed their activities, prompting a government crackdown that extended into 2008.

In 2009, the NSF fell apart, largely because the Muslim Brotherhood, in deference to the Syrian government's support for the Palestinian militant group Hamas, suspended its opposition activities in the aftermath of Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip in January. One prominent secular NSF member, Bashar al-Sha'i, quit the opposition in April and returned to Syria after publicly apologizing to the government in July, and another DDDNC member, Michel Kilo, was released from prison at the end of his three-year sentence in May. Other leading human rights figures within Syria were jailed or faced new charges of "weakening national morale" or "spreading false information" during the year. Separately, al-Assad reshuffled his government in April, replacing five ministers and creating an environment ministry. Syria's diplomatic isolation eased somewhat in 2009. High-ranking officials from the United States met with Syrian leaders for the first time since 2005, Washington pledged to return an ambassador to Damascus, and Saudi Arabian diplomats held talks with Syrian officials. However, the U.S. ambassador had not been named by year's end, the United States renewed existing sanctions on Syria, and progress on an Association Agreement with the European Union stalled.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Syria is not an electoral democracy. Under the 1973 constitution, the president is nominated by the ruling Baath Party and approved by popular referendum for seven-year terms. In practice, these referendums are orchestrated by the regime, as are elections for the 250-seat, unicameral People's Council, whose members serve four-year terms and hold little independent legislative power. Almost all power rests in the executive branch.

The only legal political parties are the Baath Party and its several small coalition partners in the ruling National Progressive Front (NPF). Independent candidates, who are heavily vetted and closely allied with the regime, are permitted to contest about a third of the People's Council seats, meaning two-thirds are reserved for the NPF.

Regime officials and their families benefit from a range of illicit economic activities. Syria is slowly opening itself economically by removing heavy tariffs and eliminating subsidies, but these limited reforms benefit a small minority at the expense of average citizens. Corruption is widespread, and bribery is often necessary to navigate the bureaucracy. Syria was ranked 126 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is heavily restricted. Vaguely worded articles of the penal code, the Emergency

Law, and a 2001 Publications Law criminalize the publication of material that harms national unity, tarnishes the image of the state, or threatens the “goals of the revolution.” Many journalists, writers, and intellectuals have been arrested under these laws. Apart from a handful of radio stations with non-news formats, all broadcast media are state owned. However, satellite dishes are common, giving most Syrians access to foreign broadcasts. More than a dozen privately owned newspapers and magazines have sprouted up in recent years, and criticism of government policy is tolerated, provided it is nuanced and does not criticize the president. The 2001 press law permits the authorities to arbitrarily deny or revoke publishing licenses and compels private print outlets to submit all material to government censors. It also imposes punishment on reporters who do not reveal their sources in response to government requests. Since the Kurdish protests in 2004, the government has cracked down on journalists calling for the expansion of Kurdish or regional rights; the information minister fired a newspaper editor in Homs in August 2009 for publishing a column about regional identity.

Though a ban on the Saudi-owned, pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat* was lifted in 2009, journalists in Syria continued to face harassment and intimidation in the form of short jail terms, travel bans, and confiscations of their notes. The Damascus office of the Dubai-based television station Al-Mashreq was closed in July for security reasons; 15 employees were held for questioning. Ibrahim al-Jaban, a prominent television journalist known for touching on taboo subjects, was banned from Syrian television in August.

Syrians access the internet only through state-run servers, which block more than 160 sites associated with the opposition, Kurdish politics, Islamic organizations, human rights, and certain foreign news services, particularly those in Lebanon. Social-networking and video-sharing websites such as Facebook and YouTube are also blocked. E-mail correspondence is reportedly monitored by intelligence agencies, which often require internet cafe owners to monitor customers. In practice, internet users often find ways around these restrictions, and poor connections and high costs tend to hinder access more effectively than government regulations. The government has been more successful in fostering self-censorship through intimidation; a dozen cyberdissidents are currently imprisoned. In September 2009, blogger Karim Antoine Arabji, who had written about corruption, was sentenced to three years in prison after already serving nearly two years in pretrial detention.

Although the constitution requires that the president be a Muslim, there is no state religion in Syria, and freedom of worship is generally respected. However, the government tightly monitors mosques and controls the appointment of Muslim clergy. All nonworship meetings of religious groups require permits, and religious fundraising is closely scrutinized. The Alawite minority dominates the officer corps of the security forces.

Academic freedom is heavily restricted. Several private universities have recently been founded, and the extent of academic freedom within them varies. University professors have been dismissed or imprisoned for expressing dissent.

Freedom of assembly is closely circumscribed. Public demonstrations are illegal without official permission, which is typically granted only to progovernment groups. The security services intensified their ban on public and private gatherings in 2006, forbidding any group of five or more people from discussing political and economic topics. This rule has been enforced through surveillance and informant reports. Such activity by the intelligence services has ensured that a culture of self-censorship and fear prevails, and ordinary Syrians are unwilling to discuss politics under most circumstances.

Freedom of association is severely restricted. All nongovernmental organizations must register with the government, which generally denies registration to reformist or human rights groups. Leaders of unlicensed human rights groups have frequently been jailed for publicizing state abuses. Professional syndicates are controlled by the Baath Party, and all labor unions must belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions, a nominally independent grouping that the government uses to control union activity. Strikes in nonagricultural sectors are legal, but they rarely occur.

While the lower courts operate with some independence and generally safeguard defendants' rights, politically sensitive cases are usually tried by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), an exceptional

tribunal established under emergency law that denies the right to appeal, limits access to legal counsel, tries many cases behind closed doors, and routinely accepts confessions obtained through torture. SSSC judges are appointed by the executive branch, and only the president and interior minister may alter verdicts. The SSSC suspended its operations in late 2008 following riots in Syria's largest prison for political detainees, but reopened its docket in 2009.

The security agencies, which operate independently of the judiciary, routinely extract confessions by torturing suspects and detaining their family members. In 2009, police killed several civilians who were protesting the demolition of illegally constructed homes outside Damascus. The state of emergency in force since 1963 gives security agencies virtually unlimited authority to arrest suspects and hold them incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge. Many of the estimated 2,500 to 3,000 political prisoners in Syria have never been tried. The majority are probably Islamists; those suspected of involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood or radical Islamist groups are regularly detained by the authorities. Possession of recordings or books by clerics whom the regime deems dangerous is often enough for arrest. After release from prison, political activists are often monitored and harassed by security services. The Syrian Human Rights Committee has reported that hundreds of government informants are rewarded for or coerced into writing reports on relatives, friends, and associates who are suspected of involvement in "antiregime" activities.

The Kurdish minority faces severe restrictions on cultural and linguistic expression. The 2001 press law requires that owners and top editors of print publications be Arabs. Some 200,000 Syrian Kurds are deprived of citizenship and are unable to obtain passports, identity cards, or birth certificates, which in turn prevents them from owning land, obtaining government employment, and voting. Suspected Kurdish activists are routinely dismissed from schools and public-sector jobs. In 2009, the government made it more difficult to hire noncitizens, resulting in the dismissal of many Kurds. While one demonstration to demand more rights for the Kurdish community was allowed to take place in northern Syria, security forces stopped four demonstrations in February and March, detaining dozens of people and referring some to the judiciary for prosecution. Intelligence services generally monitor Kurdish leaders closely, sometimes excluding them and their families from public-sector employment. At least 15 such leaders are barred from leaving Syria.

Opposition figures, human rights activists, and relatives of exiled dissidents are similarly prevented from traveling abroad, and many ordinary Kurds lack the requisite documents to leave the country. Other Syrians are generally allowed greater freedom of movement, residence, and employment.

The government has appointed some women to senior positions, including one of the two vice presidential posts. However, women remain underrepresented, holding 12.4 percent of the seats in the legislature. The government provides women with equal access to education, but many discriminatory laws remain in force. A husband may request that the Interior Ministry block his wife from traveling abroad, and women are generally barred from leaving the country with their children without proof of the father's permission. Violence against women is common, particularly in rural areas. The government imposed two-year minimum prison sentences for killings classified as "honor crimes" in 2009; previously there had been a maximum one-year sentence. State-run media estimate that there are 40 such killings each year, whereas women's rights groups put the figure at 200. Personal status law for Muslim women is governed by Sharia (Islamic law) and is discriminatory in marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters; church law governs personal status issues for Christians, in some cases barring divorce. A draft personal status law introduced in 2009 was subsequently withdrawn after women's rights activists criticized its content and Christians denounced it as an attempt to take authority away from their respective churches.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*

Freedom Of The Press - Syria (2010)

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 29

Political Environment: 33

Economic Environment: 21

Total Score: 83

- Although Article 38 of the constitution provides for freedoms of speech and the press, these rights are severely restricted in practice. 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,” as well as 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 (US\$10,000 to US\$20,000). 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 and has the power to ban them if they challenge “national sovereignty and security or offend public morality.”
- The 1963 State of Emergency Law allows authorities to arrest journalists under ambiguous charges of threatening “national security.” The law “prohibits acts of speech inciting sectarianism” and “false information” that is in opposition to the “goals of the revolution.” Defamation remains a criminal offense.
- Criticism of the government can lead to lawsuits, fines, harassment, and dismissal. Several journalists were reportedly removed from their positions for this reason in 2009. Charges are often arbitrary, ambiguous, or simply not specified. In April 2009, Syrian Kurdish journalist Faruq Haji Mustafa, who wrote for the London-based daily *Al-Hayat* and the Lebanese daily *Al-Safir*, was arrested and held incommunicado; he was eventually released in June. In August, Ahmad Takrouni was dismissed as editor of a regional newspaper after it published an article claiming that regional identity was more important than national identity.
- Local media freedom advocates are routinely harassed. In September, authorities closed down the Damascus office of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression without providing a reason, although the organization still operates out of its French office.
- Despite the positive step of allowing privately owned print media in 2001, the government strictly controls the dissemination of information. The Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance routinely censor both domestic and foreign publications. Currently, all Kurdish-language publications are banned, though they are still available in some areas. In July, authorities closed down local offices of the Dubai-based Al-Mashriq satellite television channel, claiming that it filmed a Damascus market without permission. The government also halted the production of the television program *Alama Farika* and the weekly periodical *Al-Khabar* without sufficient reason, and prohibited the circulation of an October issue of the Lebanese daily *Al-Akhabar* due to an opinion article mentioning an improvement in Syrian-Saudi relations and noting a visit by the Saudi king.
- Journalists face frequent harassment, including banishment from the country, neglected accreditation requests, and extralegal intimidation through arrest, detention,

and torture. In July, Palestinian journalist Helmi Musa, a writer covering Israel for *Al-Safir*, was detained for several days while participating in a political seminar in Damascus. In August, freelance journalist Ibrahim al-Jaban was arbitrarily banned from working at the television station Al-Suriya. In November, journalist Ma'an Aqel was arrested and held incommunicado through the end of the year.

- The government and the ruling Ba'ath Party own most newspaper publishing houses. There are a small number of periodicals affiliated with minor regime-aligned political parties, as well as privately owned newspapers like *Al-Watan*, *Al-Iqtissad*, and *Al-Khabar*.
- Nearly all of Syria's radio and television outlets are state owned, with a handful of private stations that do not broadcast news or report on political issues. These include Al-Medina radio and the television stations Ad-Dounia and Al-Rai. Satellite television is widely available.
- Approximately 18 percent of Syrians accessed the internet in 2009. Critical journalists have increasingly used the medium to voice their dissent. However, the government has stepped up its online censorship and monitoring, as well as harassment of critical bloggers. By year's end, roughly 241 sites were banned in Syria, including the blog-hosting platform Blogger.com, the microblogging service Twitter, and the social-networking site Facebook. In September, authorities discontinued access to the website of a Lebanese nongovernmental organization that covers press freedom. In 2005, the Press Law was reformed to crack down on electronic publications, requiring that editors of electronic media be at least 25 years old, Syrian nationals, and current residents of Syria, and that they not be employees of a foreign government. Proposed reforms introduced in 2009 would extend the Press Law's penalties, including jail sentences, to internet users. In September, blogger Karim Arbaji was charged with undermining national morale and received a three-year prison sentence.