



Women
Journalists
Without
Chains



Blood-Stained Words:

Press Freedom Written in Red in Syria



Introduction:

The current regime in Syria traces its origins to the **1963** coup orchestrated by the Arab Socialist Baath Party. This pivotal moment led to the dissolution of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, establishing a centralized power structure. In **1973**, a new constitution solidified this framework, following the **1970** coup led by Hafez al-Assad, then the defense minister. This constitution established a one-party system with the state leader as the ultimate authority, claiming to provide 'political, intellectual, and organizational leadership' to society.

Half a century ago, the Assad family seized power in Syria, establishing a regime that has persisted through generations. Hafez al-Assad, who came to power in **1970**, ruled with an iron fist until his death in **2000**, at which point his son, Bashar al-Assad, inherited the presidency. Bashar initially promised reforms aimed at establishing rights and freedoms, but his policies ultimately mirrored his father's authoritarian approach.

For decades, journalism and public life in Syria have operated under this restrictive regime. The media landscape is dominated by a single perspective, tightly controlled by a narrow elite whose interests dictate the narrative. This environment stifles dissent and limits the diversity of thought, reducing journalism to a tool for propagating the official line rather than a platform for free expression and critical discourse. Consequently, the state of journalism in Syria mirrors the broader societal constraints, with opposition voices silenced and genuine dialogue suppressed.

In **2011**, a popular revolution erupted, fueled by widespread discontent over the regime's failure to deliver on its promises. Initially calling for reforms, the protests quickly escalated into demands for the regime's overthrow as state violence intensified. The response from the army, security forces, and intelligence agencies was brutal, leading to a protracted conflict that has devastated the country and its people.

Over the past **14** years, journalists—both men and women—have faced severe repression and violence at the hands of the Syrian regime and various factions involved in the conflict. Many have been subjected to arbitrary detention, torture, and even assassination as the regime seeks to silence dissent and control the narrative.



The Syrian revolution emerged as part of a widespread popular uprising across the Middle East and North Africa that began in late **2010**, collectively known as the Arab Spring. This movement fundamentally altered the political and social landscape in Syria following its outbreak in March **2011**. During this period, the press and social media played crucial roles in providing the public with access to information about violations and events occurring both in Syria and throughout the Arab world.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March **2011**, the political and social dynamics in Syria have undergone radical changes. These changes have significantly impacted the country due to various internal and external factors, including armed conflict, foreign interventions, and local armed groups. These elements have collectively targeted journalists, criminalized public discourse, and enabled the Syrian regime and other conflict parties to act with impunity. This environment has led to an increase in violations against journalists, compelling them to self-censor to avoid retaliation, such as killing, arrest, torture, and physical assault.

This report examines the state of press freedom in Syria from **2011** to **2024**, highlighting the legislative and legal frameworks as well as the pervasive violations that make the country one of the most dangerous places for journalists worldwide. It also offers recommendations for journalists, policymakers in Syria, the international community, and relevant organizations.

Drawing on open sources from Syrian organizations dedicated to press freedom and human rights, reports from the Human Rights Council on the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), and contributions from both Syrian and international media outlets, the report includes insights gained from communication with journalists operating within Syria.

The first chapter examines the current state of press freedom and the challenges of impunity. The second chapter explores the restrictive legislative and legal frameworks that regulate the media. The third chapter outlines violations of press freedom that have taken place from **2011** to **2024**. Finally, the fourth chapter offers practical recommendations for improvement.

Chapter One: The Situation in Syria

The conflict in Syria, which escalated after **2011**, has become increasingly complex due to the involvement of various foreign nations, including Russia, Iran, Turkey, and



the United States, alongside international terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State (ISIS), and Hezbollah. This multifaceted situation has led to the division of Syria into several regions, each controlled by different authorities. The Syrian Arab Republic, under Bashar al-Assad, controls about two-thirds of the country with support from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. In contrast, the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria, led by the Syrian Democratic Forces, accounts for roughly a quarter of the territory, primarily Kurdish-controlled.

Approximately 10% is held by Syrian opposition forces supported by Turkey. Within this fragmented landscape, groups like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and ISIS control the remaining territories. Despite the ongoing challenges, since the beginning of 2024, an undeclared yet stable ceasefire has been observed in most regions. This fragile peace offers a glimmer of hope for potential dialogue and resolution, although the underlying issues remain deeply entrenched. The complex interplay of local and international interests continues to shape the future of Syria, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address both humanitarian concerns and the political landscape.

The "Arab Spring" in Syria opened a new chapter for Syrians, granting them access to information that had been suppressed by the regime for decades. Independent media outlets, operating from exile, emerged as a vital source of news, driven by journalists dedicated to keeping the public informed about the situation in their country. Unfortunately, in recent years, many of these independent outlets have been forced to close or have significantly curtailed their activities due to a lack of funding.¹ In stark contrast, most Syrian media is state-funded, while many private pro-government outlets are owned by businessmen closely linked to the president, his family, and the military and security establishment,² reinforcing the regime's narrative and control over information.

The division within Syria has led to three distinct media environments: pro-government (Assad regime), opposition (including independent), and Kurdish. Regardless of the environment in which they work, journalists face clear red lines in their reporting. Media workers have been targeted by all parties in the conflict: the

¹ Rizik Al-Abi, The painful death of Syria's independent media, 22/8/2024, See 01/11/2024 in Linke; <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2024/08/the-painful-death-of-syrias-independent-media/>.

² Syria media guide, p.p.



Syrian army and its allies, armed opposition factions, Kurdish-led forces, and jihadist or armed groups.³

The Syrian regime and other factions have effectively silenced voices discussing public affairs, using fear and intimidation as powerful tools to suppress press freedom. This country, known before 1963 for its intellectual, cultural, and political diversity, has seen assassinations, arrests, torture, and enforced disappearances carried out both in secret and openly. New laws have been enacted to strip Syrians of their right to free speech and public discourse.

Since 2011, Syria has witnessed a remarkable surge in media development, resulting in a vibrant and diverse independent media landscape. During various phases of the uprising, up to 298 newspapers circulated across the country, alongside 17 state-run or regime-affiliated publications. By 2016, there were 196 media outlets representing a wide array of perspectives, although many faced significant challenges related to funding and maintaining their independence. In opposition-controlled areas, limited access to the internet and electricity shifted the focus toward traditional media, such as radio and print.⁴

Citizen journalists utilized smartphones to document events on the ground, sharing their recordings on social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, which provided international media with valuable insights into the unfolding situation. However, as time progressed, foreign newsrooms grew increasingly cautious about publishing reports from activists, concerned about potential manipulation and the spread of misinformation.⁵

- **Media Control in Syrian Regime Areas**

While the constitution ostensibly guarantees press freedom, the reality in government-controlled areas of Syria is marked by severe restrictions on the media. Journalists who dare to publish even the slightest criticism of the authorities face harsh repercussions, including censorship, detention, torture, and even death while

³ Syria media guide, 19/4/2023, See 01/11/2024 in Linke: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703914>.

⁴ Issa, Antoun, Syria's New Media Landscape, 6/12/2016, , See 10/11/2024 in Linke: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/syrias-new-media-landscape>.

⁵ Ibid.



in custody.⁶ All media outlets are required to obtain permission from the Ministry of the Interior to operate, and without an accreditation card, journalists find themselves unemployed.

The regime employs various laws to maintain strict control over the press, including the Press Law of 2011 and the Cybercrime Law of 2021 (amended in 2022), which empower authorities to penalize journalists for "publishing fake news online that undermines the prestige of the state." Additionally, the 1965 "Protection of the Revolution" Law is still in effect, criminalizing any dissenting opinion and imposing severe penalties, including the death penalty, for actions that contradict the government's position.⁷ The Penal Code and Anti-Terrorism Laws enacted in 2012 further reinforce this oppressive framework, ensuring that dissenting voices are silenced.

- **Democratic Autonomous Administration**

Since 2012, the Kurds have controlled northern and eastern Syria, working alongside local Arab allies and other minorities, which has fostered a vibrant Kurdish media landscape. However, the Autonomous Administration has implemented severe restrictions on press freedom, leading to the prosecution and arrest of journalists and significant limitations on their work.

In 2021, the authorities introduced a media law, followed by executive regulations in 2022 that mandate journalists to obtain prior approval to operate in Autonomous Administration areas. This process often involves interrogation. Journalists have reported intentional delays in the licensing process and a lack of transparency in how authorities interact with the media, favoring those who align with their narrative and propaganda.⁸

In February 2022, the de facto authorities revoked the license of [Rudaw Media Network](#), an organization based in Iraqi Kurdistan, accusing it of incitement and

⁶ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024: Syria, accessed November 1, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2024>.

⁷ Al-Hussein, Abdul Razak. Freedom of Expression in Syria: Between Law and Reality. June 23, 2020. Accessed November 3, 2024. <https://www.harmoon.org/?p=11296>.

⁸ Media in Northeastern Syria: "Monopolized" Information and Conditional Membership. Published April 6, 2023. Accessed November 5, 2024. <https://npasyria.com/147852/>.



misinformation. By mid-March 2023, these authorities intensified pressure on journalists to join the Free Media Union, which operates under the influence of the Autonomous Administration.⁹

- **Opposition and Exile Areas**

Many anti-government media outlets operate from exile, particularly in Turkey. In contrast, opposition media based inside Syria are primarily located in areas that are outside government control. In these regions, journalists face intense pressure to align with the dominant armed factions, and their movements are heavily censored. While these areas do not provide a democratic model that respects press freedom and freedom of expression, they are somewhat more open to discussions about public affairs compared to regions controlled by the Syrian regime or extremist groups.

Journalists in exile, especially those in neighboring countries like Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq, face significant risks, including deportation. This risk has increased as diplomatic relations between Bashar al-Assad and the leaders of these countries improve. As a result, many journalists find themselves with two grim choices: facing death or imprisonment in Syrian regime prisons, as most have been issued arrest warrants or political sentences. Although the political justifications for deportation vary by country, the term "voluntary return" is often used as a pretext for such actions.¹⁰

⁹ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024: Syria, available at

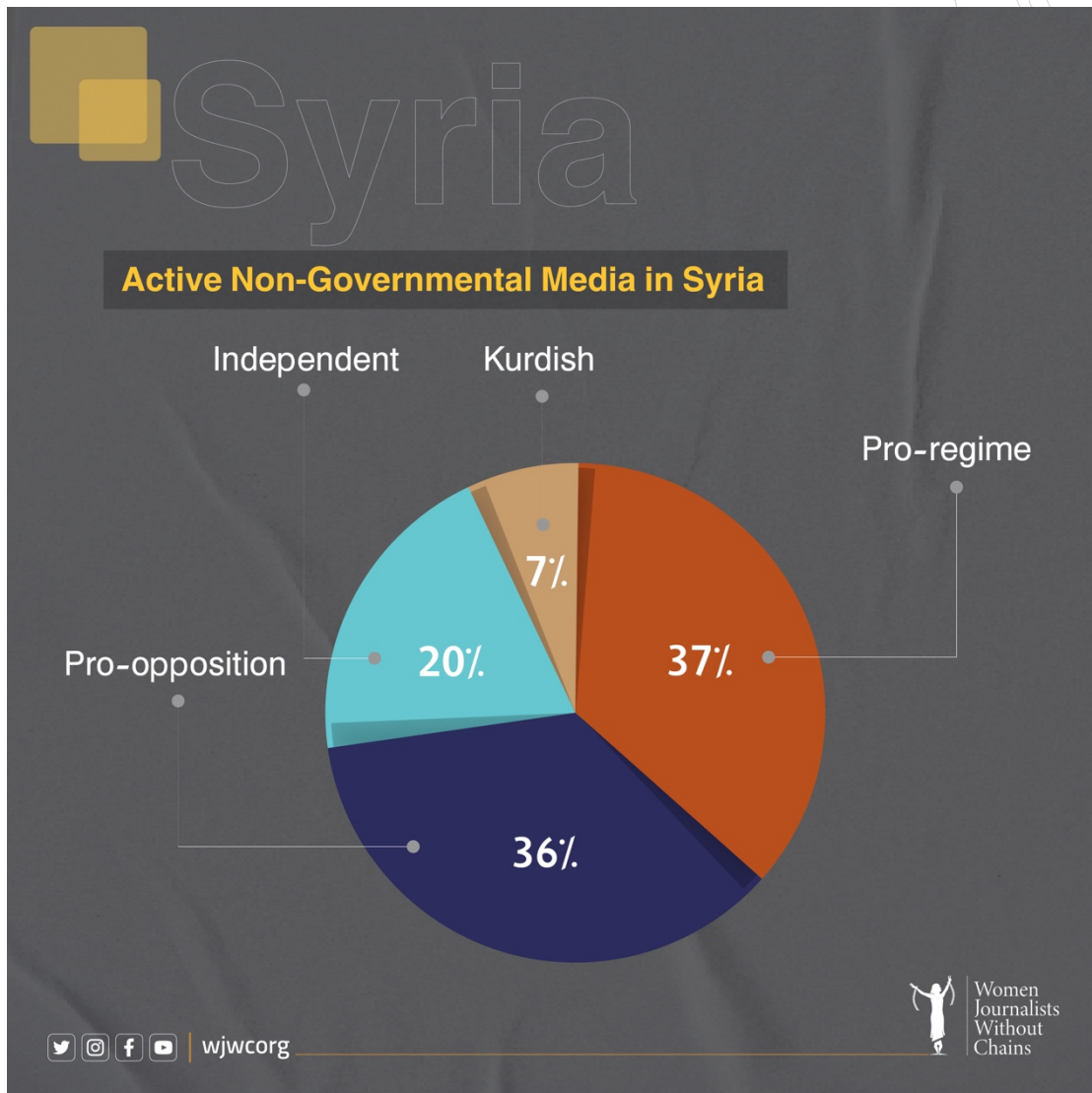
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¹⁰ Syrian journalists threatened by neighbouring states, as Syria remains second most dangerous country in the world for reporters, RSF and SCM warn, 14/6/2024, , See 11/11/2024 in Linke:

<https://rsf.org/en/syrian-journalists-threatened-neighbouring-states-syria-remains-second-most-dangerous-country-world>.

Figure 1: Active Non-Governmental Media in Syria

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Legislative and Legal Systems Restricting Freedom of the Press

Despite advancements in electronic and cognitive spaces since the 1960s, there has been no significant change regarding freedom of the press in the Syrian Republic, particularly in areas under regime control. Repressive laws continue to target freedom of opinion and expression, prohibiting even the most basic criticisms on social media.

¹¹ Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C. (2016). Policy Paper.

https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PP9_Issa_Syrianmedia_web_0.pdf.



This situation persists despite the Syrian Constitution (2012) affirming in Article 42 that "every citizen has the right to express his opinion freely and publicly in speech, writing, or through all means of expression." Article 43 further states that "the state guarantees freedom of the press, printing, publishing, and media, and their independence in accordance with the law."¹²

While the constitution prohibits government interference in the civil judiciary, judges and prosecutors are effectively required to belong to the Baath Party and are subject to political leadership. As a result, journalists face investigation and trial in both traditional and military courts, which offer no guarantees of due process. Although civilians can appeal military court decisions to the Military Chamber of the Court of Cassation, the judges of this chamber remain ultimately subordinate to military and intelligence authorities.¹³

The widespread collapse of state authority and the proliferation of militias across much of Syria have resulted in grave violations against journalists, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, summary trials, and punishments enacted by all parties engaged in the civil war.

The government maintains stringent control over all media outlets, including publications, television, and radio stations, as well as the majority of print media within its jurisdiction. It imposes extensive censorship on news websites and social media platforms, particularly targeting those that offer critical perspectives on the government. The legislation governing censorship is marked by a lack of transparency and significantly expands penalties for any criticism directed at security forces or government officials.

Most laws regulating journalistic activities were instituted by the Bashar al-Assad regime. In territories controlled by opposition forces, legal frameworks are minimal, with the exception of a media law established by the "Autonomous Administration." This chapter primarily analyzes the legislation enacted by the government since 2011, reflecting a longstanding policy that is antagonistic toward freedom of

¹² For further details, see the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, Voltaire Network, 2012, available at [<https://www.voltairenet.org/article173033.html>].

¹³ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024: Syria, available at [.....]



expression and press freedom¹⁴—an approach that has been perpetuated by successive governments since 1963. Journalists face severe repercussions for publication offenses, including the potential imposition of the death penalty, particularly in cases where torture results in fatal outcomes during custody.

The Syrian regime has leveraged its comprehensive control over legislative authority to enact laws that justify and legitimize a broad spectrum of violations against its citizens. Additionally, it has utilized executive powers and the influence of security services over the People's Assembly to pass these laws—often termed "laws on demand"—despite their fundamental contradictions with international human rights standards and the interests of the Syrian people.¹⁵

1- Law No. 6: Protection of the Revolution (1965)

Syria's 1965 Law No. 6, ostensibly designed to "protect the revolution," functions as a sweeping suppression of dissent. Article Three imposes the death penalty for any act, speech, or publication deemed detrimental to the state's socialist system.¹⁶ Similarly, harsh penalties, including life imprisonment with hard labor, are levied against those organizing protests or undermining public confidence.

The law's enforcement by exceptional military courts, including the prosecution of journalists, effectively eliminates freedom of expression and independent media capable of holding the government accountable. This legislation prevents any meaningful scrutiny of public affairs, corruption, or government decisions impacting Syrian citizens.

¹⁴ For a detailed examination of the relationship between successive governments and journalists, please refer to <https://tinyurl.com/2bhsyu5g>.

¹⁵ The Law No. 19 of 2024, establishing the Ministry of Information issued by the Syrian regime, egregiously violates freedom of media, opinion, and expression. Published on June 13, 2024, and accessed on November 15, 2024, at the following link: <https://tinyurl.com/297s54cb>.

¹⁶ Abdul Bari Othman, "Freedom of Expression in Syria: Forgotten Texts and Other Restrictions," published on March 20, 2020, accessed November 11, 2024, available at <https://www.harmoon.org/?p=7943>.



2- Decree-Law No. 110 (2011), amending the 1949 Penal Code (amended 2022)

This law¹⁷ severely restricts freedom of assembly in Syria. While ostensibly including a "right to demonstrate," the law's requirements for Ministry of Interior approval at least five days prior to any protest render it virtually impossible to exercise. The Ministry retains broad authority to alter protest dates, locations, or cancel demonstrations entirely, citing concerns about state interests, public safety, or property damage. Protests held outside this restrictive framework are classified as "rioting" under Article 336, highlighting the government's control over public expression. These provisions effectively stifle any meaningful exercise of the right to peaceful protest.

Article 19 of the law addresses the punishment of individuals, both Syrian and foreign, who incite felonies or misdemeanors that threaten state security, even if these actions occur outside the country. This law stands apart from many international penal codes due to its explicit inclusion of "political felonies" and "political misdemeanors," with punishments ranging from execution and life imprisonment to simple imprisonment (Articles 38 and 40). However, the law's failure to define these terms, or to distinguish between them, creates a significant problem.

The vague criteria—actions committed with "political motives" or a "base selfish motive"—leave the determination of what constitutes a political crime entirely to the judge's discretion (Articles 195, 197, 198, and 199). This ambiguity allows for the arbitrary targeting of political activists and journalists who criticize the government or engage in public discourse, potentially leading to their arrest and even execution based on subjective interpretations of vaguely defined offenses.

The Penal Code contains overly broad and vague provisions that can be readily used to criminalize independent journalism. It expands the punishment for political "felonies or misdemeanors" to include civil deprivation, going beyond other penalties. Specifically, Article 49 allows for "isolation and exclusion" from all

¹⁷ General Penal Code No. 148 of 1949 (amended by Legislative Decree No. 1 of 2011)

<https://tinyurl.com/2xl7n7jv>.



citizenship rights, including the right to vote or hold office, and the loss of all other civil, political, sectarian, and union rights.

Furthermore, it prohibits those convicted from owning, editing, or contributing to any newspaper or publication. This effectively eliminates the convicted individual's existence as a citizen and human being, as the authorities can easily use the vague term "crime that affects state security"—a common tactic of Middle Eastern and North African dictatorships—to suppress independent journalism and political dissent.

Journalists in Syria can face accusations of collaboration with hostile forces or what the law describes as "plotting against the state," even without knowledge of the specific plots involved (Articles 256-270). They can also be punished for criticizing the president, ministers, or diplomats from countries that maintain good relations with the Syrian regime (Article 282).

Moreover, publishing news or critiques that are deemed to "weaken national sentiment," "awaken racist or sectarian strife," "weaken the nation's morale," or "undermine the state's prestige or financial standing" is criminalized (Articles 285, 286, and 287). Criticism of public officials or government employees can lead to imprisonment if considered "contempt in writing or drawing" (Articles 373, 374, 376, and 570).

In the 2022 amendments, Article 285 was revised from "national sentiment" to include "harming the national or ethnic identity or awakening racist or sectarian strife." Similarly, Article 286 changed from "weakening the nation's morale" to "spreading despair or weakness among members of society."

This directly contradicts international principles, specifically the Johannesburg Principles on National Security, Freedom of Expression, and Access to Information (1995).¹⁸ These principles, grounded in international human rights law, explicitly state that no one should face punishment for criticizing or insulting a nation, state, its symbols, government, organs, or public officials, whether domestic or foreign. The Syrian law's provisions, therefore, represent a clear violation of internationally recognized standards of freedom of expression.

¹⁸ Johannesburg Principles on National Security, Freedom of Expression, and Access to Information, U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/1996/39 (1996).



The Syrian Penal Code offers no protection for journalistic sources. Public officials who leak documents face punishment (Articles 273 and 274), and journalists who publish or report on these documents are considered participants in the crime (Article 213). Furthermore, Article 214 holds the publication's director, or the editor-in-chief if no director exists, responsible for any crimes committed through the newspaper. This lack of source protection creates a chilling effect, severely hindering investigative journalism and the ability of journalists to report on matters of public interest.

Syria's ambiguous penal code uses broad language that can criminalize independent journalism, encompassing acts defined as high treason, espionage, or supporting the enemy. Widespread censorship under the regime limits documentation of violations, though some cases, such as the 2018 charge against pro-regime journalist Wahid Yazbek under Article 285 for criticizing a governor on Facebook, have emerged.¹⁹

3- Syria's Counter-Terrorism Law (Law No. 19, 2012) and its Impact on Human Rights

The Syrian president's 2011 abolition of the Supreme State Security Court—a 1968 institution notorious for targeting human rights activists, politicians, and critics—was swiftly followed by the enactment of the Counter-Terrorism Law. This law created a specialized court, staffed predominantly by Ba'ath Party-affiliated judges, whose rulings are largely unappealable.²⁰

While Syrian law defines certain crimes and misdemeanors with clarity, the counter-terrorism legislation, alongside provisions related to political and state security crimes (including those in the Information Crimes Law), employs vague language. This ambiguity facilitates arbitrary detention and conviction, effectively replicating the repressive practices of its predecessor.²¹

¹⁹ Johannesburg Principles on National Security, Freedom of Expression, and Access to Information, U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/1996/39 (1996). Available at: <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/instree/johannesburg.html>.

²⁰ Othman, *ibid*.

²¹ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. (2024). Report to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/57/86). Submitted to the 57th session of the UN Human Rights Council, September 9–October 9, 2024. Available at:

<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/133/77/pdf/g2413377.pdf>.



Syria's counter-terrorism law defines terrorism broadly as "any act that aims to create a state of panic among the people or to disturb public security."²² This expansive definition has enabled authorities to convict journalists, subjecting them to life imprisonment or even the death penalty. Experts view the law as a replacement for the state of emergency that governed Syria from 1963 to April 2011,²³ providing a legal framework for repression. Furthermore, the law grants individuals the power to seize legitimately owned property through a procedurally flawed process. Its primary function appears to be the intimidation of citizens, suppressing constitutionally and internationally protected activities, including the essential work of journalists.

The law also prescribes temporary hard labor as punishment for "conspiracy," a vaguely defined term, and criminalizes "promoting terrorist acts." This includes distributing printed materials or information, in any form, intended to promote terrorism, with the same penalty applying to website management or use for this purpose (Articles 3 and 8). This directly impacts the press and media, which play a vital role in informing the public about terrorism. Unjustifiable restrictions on their operation, and the punishment of journalists for performing legitimate functions, are unacceptable.

Under Syrian law, failure to report knowledge of crimes under the Anti-Terrorism Law results in imprisonment of one to three years (Article 10). This applies to both Syrian and foreign residents. Journalists face additional penalties for disseminating information deemed by authorities to cause panic or insecurity; they are liable for both failing to report and for the dissemination itself. Approximately one month later, Law No. 22/2012 established the Anti-Terrorism Court, with jurisdiction over both civilians and military personnel. This court's proceedings deviate from standard legal procedures (Articles 4, 6, and 7),²⁴ prohibiting appeals despite preserving the right

²² Law No. 19 of 2012, Anti-Terrorism Law. Syrian Arab Republic. Available at: <http://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=55151&cat=4306>.

²³ Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. (2019, January 7). TIMEP Brief: Law No. 19 of 2012: Counter-terrorism Law. <https://timep.org/2019/01/07/timep-brief-law-no-19-of-2012-counter-terrorism-law/>.

²⁴ Syrian People's Assembly. (2012, July 26). Law No. 22 of 2012, Establishing a Court to Address Terrorism Cases, Based in Damascus. Retrieved from <http://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=201&nid=4304&RID=->



to a defense. Furthermore, the president authorized pre-trial asset seizure and travel bans for those accused under the Anti-Terrorism Law.²⁵

The law and its subsidiary legislation grant officials broad authority to criminalize journalistic work, a practice that violates the legal principle of precise statutory language. This legislation also contravenes international conventions and treaties. While detailed documentation of court activity under this law is scarce, its frequent application is evident. A prominent example is the trial of Mazen Darwish, head of the Syrian Media Center, and four colleagues, charged with "propaganda for terrorist acts" for their human rights monitoring and documentation work.²⁶ Between 2015 and 2020, the court reportedly handled over 90,000 cases, predominantly involving human rights activists, politicians, citizen journalists, and other free speech advocates.²⁷

4- Syria's Cybercrime Law No. 20 of 2022

This law is explicitly designed to control society and restrict online freedom of expression and opinion. It represents a formalization and intensification of the repressive measures implemented after the 2011 popular protests, building upon the 2012 Law No. 17 concerning internet-related crimes. Unlike similar laws in other countries that focus on electronic development, combating piracy, and economic security, the Syrian regime had previously issued the "Electronic Transactions" Law in 2014.

This Cybercrime Law imposes exceptionally harsh penalties, exceeding those stipulated in both the General Penal Code and the Military Penal Code, which already severely restrict press freedom. The law serves as a powerful tool to restrict and

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²⁵ Syrian Arab Republic. (2012, September 16). [Legislative Decree No. 63: Powers of the Judicial Police].

Retrieved from <http://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=201&nid=16218&ref=tree&>.

²⁶ Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Counterterrorism Court Used to Stifle Dissent," June 25, 2013,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/25/syria-counterterrorism-court-used-stifle-dissent>.

²⁷ Organizing in Syria: Legislative Fact Sheet. The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, March 26, 2021.

Available at https://timep.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/10YearsOnFactSheet-Syria_3-26-21-FINAL.pdf.

monitor internet and social media usage, in clear violation of international law. **These violations include:**

- **Privacy protection:** Despite constitutional guarantees of privacy and confidentiality of communications (Articles 36 and 37), the law mandates that internet service providers (ISPs) retain user data and content indefinitely, subject to government request. Failure to comply results in imprisonment and fines (Articles 4, 5, and 6). Furthermore, ISPs face imprisonment for disclosing data, even if compelled to store it (Article 7), creating a direct conflict with privacy rights. The government's power to compel ISPs to remove, alter, or correct content, under penalty of imprisonment and fines (Article 8), further undermines privacy and freedom of expression. The law thus forces ISPs into a position where data retention is inherently a violation of user privacy, regardless of whether data is ultimately disclosed.
- **Criminalization of Criticism of Public Officials:** Cybercrime Law (Articles 24 & 25) uses vaguely defined terms like "defamation" and "slander" to punish criticism of public officials with imprisonment and fines. This broad interpretation silences journalists and citizens expressing dissenting opinions and discourages reporting on abuses within public institutions. The law contradicts the fundamental principle that public officials are subject to public scrutiny and criticism, especially from journalists, regarding both their official conduct and relevant aspects of their private lives.
- **Brutal Punishments for Criticism:** The law metes out harsh penalties—up to 15 years imprisonment and a 15 million Syrian pound fine—for a wide array of online activities (Article 27). These include creating or disseminating content perceived as inciting unconstitutional actions, secession, armed rebellion, or undermining the government. Articles 28 and 29 further criminalize the online publication of what is vaguely defined as "false news" that harms national unity or undermines confidence in the national currency. The ambiguous nature of these offenses effectively silences independent online journalism and dissent, including criticism of the political and economic situation and calls for greater rights and freedoms. The law's broad scope allows prosecution for simply expressing opinions or reporting on matters of public concern.



- **Re-publication:** Under Article 35, the mere act of republishing online content is considered a crime, subject to the same penalties as the original publication. Furthermore, even interacting with previously published content is criminalized. A previous statement by the head of the Cybercrime Branch suggesting that emojis could be considered a cybercrime,²⁸ although later retracted, highlights the law's potential for arbitrary and overly broad application. This demonstrates the problematic nature of the law and its interpretation.²⁹
- **No Protection for Journalists:** The law has been arbitrarily used to target journalists and online activists, suppressing freedom of expression and silencing dissenting voices in the digital sphere.³⁰

The Cybercrime Law imposes disproportionately harsh penalties for criticizing security forces and government employees, particularly for acts vaguely defined as "defaming or insulting" a public official. The law's failure to clearly define acts that undermine state prestige or harm national unity creates a broad scope for prosecution, effectively eliminating any meaningful freedom of opinion and expression. The ambiguous language throughout the law allows for arbitrary application and suppression of dissent.³¹

The stipulations in this law clearly violate the principle of proportionality, a fundamental requirement for any limitations on freedom of expression and the press. Such restrictions must be precisely tailored to achieve their intended protective function, as mandated by Article 19, paragraph 3, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The principle of proportionality requires that any measures taken be commensurate with the legitimate interests they aim to protect. This

²⁸ Courrier International. "En Syrie, on criminalise les émojis." 22 février 2022.

https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/libertes-en-syrie-on-criminalise-les-emojis?fbclid=IwAR2VL9401k3mgEj8ekg_0mxed9TT5M6vXverqJp8aisr5u1IBWYu5gzsE-4

²⁹ Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM). (October 2022). Legal Review of the Information Crimes Law No. 20 of 2022. <https://scm.bz/legal-review-of-the-information-crimes-law-no-20-of-2022-ar/>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.



principle applies not only to the legal framework defining these restrictions but also to how administrative and judicial authorities implement the law.³²

Moreover, the law's provisions for monitoring internet content, blocking websites, and imposing excessively severe penalties contribute to a substantial and unjustified infringement on the fundamental right to freedom of expression. The use of criminal penalties represents a serious interference with this right and constitutes an excessive response, applicable only in the most extreme cases. Criminal law should be applied exceptionally rarely and strictly limited to situations far beyond mere expression of opinion.³³

5. Media Legislation: Legislative Decree 108 of 2011 and the 2024 Draft Law

Legislative Decree 108 of 2011, replacing Law No. 50/2001, ostensibly decriminalized journalistic activity. However, despite pressure from preceding protests, the law³⁴ failed to meaningfully protect journalists. Arrests, imprisonment, and assaults continued unabated, even immediately following its enactment.³⁵

Details regarding the 2024 draft media law remain scarce, with limited provisions surfacing through leaks from the Journalists' Union and press freedom organizations. Significantly, journalists, women journalists, freedom of expression advocates, and other key stakeholders were excluded from its development.

While the 2011 law asserts that the media are independent and "carry out their mission freely," and guarantees freedom of expression and fundamental rights through the constitution and international agreements, these principles remain largely unfulfilled. Citizens are purportedly entitled to access information (Articles 2

³² Human Rights Committee. General Comment No. 34 on Article 19: Freedoms of Opinion and Expression, para. 34 (CCPR/C/GC/34). Published on September 12, 2011. Accessed on September 18, 2024. Available at: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g11/453/31/pdf/g1145331.pdf>.

³³ Committee to Protect Journalists. "The 'New' Syrian Media Law Is Nothing New." September 7, 2011. Accessed November 26, 2024. Available at: <https://cpj.org/2011/09/the-new-syrian-media-law-is-nothing-new/>.

³⁴ Syrian Arab Republic. (2011). Legislative Decree No. 108: Media Law. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/2c4p5kqg>.

³⁵ El Zein, D. (2011, September 7). The 'new' Syrian media law is nothing new. Committee to Protect Journalists. Retrieved from <https://cpj.org/2011/09/the-new-syrian-media-law-is-nothing-new/>.



and 3), yet in practice, both private and public media are heavily controlled by Syrian authorities and their affiliates.

The law claims to protect media freedom, stating that no party may compel journalists to disclose their sources except through judicial means (Article 7). However, it also outlines numerous prohibitions and violations:

- **Publication Prohibitions:** Media outlets face strict prohibitions against publishing any information that may impact "national unity," "national security," or "state symbols." They are also forbidden from content that "incites sectarian strife," "insults" religious beliefs, promotes criminal activity, violence, or terrorism, or "harms state symbols." These restrictions align with prohibitions outlined in the General Penal Code, the Military Penal Code, the Anti-Terrorism Code, and the Cybercrime Law (Article 12). The law imposes limitations that directly affect journalists' access to information and their freedom of expression, specifically prohibiting any publication about the armed forces unless it is an official statement or has received prior approval. Although this restriction regarding the armed forces was removed in the new law, similar prohibitions remain in Article 123 of the Military Penal Code.
- **Media Independence and Licensing:** The new draft law disregards media independence, replacing it in Article 4 with the statement that "media, through all its means, performs its mission freely in accordance with the provisions of the constitution and the law." The law defines a media professional as a natural person who creates, prepares, or edits media content for publication in a licensed media outlet and is registered with the union or approved by the ministry. This excludes independent journalists and their right to work. Crucially, the law mandates licensing of all media outlets by the authorities.³⁶ The decision overlooks journalists as individuals by permitting licenses only for companies, thus violating Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It fails to recognize that journalism encompasses a diverse spectrum of stakeholders, from traditional mass media to individual bloggers.

³⁶ Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM). (2024). The New Media Draft Law in Syria 2024. <https://scm.bz/the-new-media-draft-law-in-syria-2024-ar/>.

In a society polarized by conflict, many independent journalists have started identifying as "media activists." Their personal pages and accounts on social media platforms have evolved into media outlets and vital information sources, effectively reporting on current events and providing insights from the ground.³⁷

The Syrian regime enacted Law No. (19) of 2024,³⁸ establishing a Ministry of Information to replace the 1961 ministry. This law regulates media operations in Syria, and the ministry's responsibilities include supervising the licensing and accreditation of all media types (visual, audio, written, and digital), as well as monitoring the content of printed materials entering the country (Article 4). The law aims to produce a national media discourse committed to national issues, guarantee citizens' access to media services, and ensure freedom of media work and expression in accordance with the constitution and the law (Article 3). However, the law does not fully guarantee media independence. The law contravenes international standards for media regulation.³⁹ The Ministry of Information's unchecked authority to register newspapers and journalists violates Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),⁴⁰ which guarantees freedom of expression. Furthermore, the establishment of media monitoring committees constitutes a serious infringement on freedom of expression, potentially chilling dissent due to the inherent threat of censorship.

- **Journalists Unprotected:** The revised law offers inadequate protection for journalists. The removal of Article 7(a), which previously guaranteed media freedom and protected journalists from liability for published opinions except within legal limits, significantly weakens these protections. Replacing it with vague reference to "principles and values" provides no concrete safeguards. Similarly, the deletion of Article 7(b), which prevented compelled disclosure

³⁷ Reporters Without Borders (RSF): Syria |

<https://rsf.org/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AF/%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7>.

³⁸ Syrian Ministry of Information. Law No. 19 of 2024, concerning the establishment of the Ministry of Information. [Retrieved from <http://www.moi.gov.sy/index.php?content=2&article=NjQyMzU=> (Note: This URL may no longer be active or contain the same content.)].

³⁹ ARTICLE 19. (2012, April 5). International standards: Regulation of the print media. Retrieved September 16, 2024, from <https://www.article19.org/resources/international-standards-regulation-print-media/>.

⁴⁰ Human Rights Committee. (1999, April 8). Concluding observations of the Human Rights Committee: Lesotho. UN Doc. No. CCPR/C/79/Add.106, para. 23.

of sources except through judicial process in a closed session,⁴¹ leaves journalists vulnerable to pressure and jeopardizes their ability to report freely. The elimination of "rticle 101, which pro"ibited searches, arrests, and interrogations of journalists without notification to and representation from the Media Council or Journalists Union, further erodes their legal protections.⁴²

- **Restricted Media Funding:** The new media law severely restricts funding for Syrian media outlets, raising concerns about their financial independence. Articles 15, 16, and 17 prohibit journalists from receiving advertising revenue or benefits beyond what's approved by a council, and forbid media outlets from accepting any foreign donations, subsidies, or benefits, directly or indirectly. The government will solely determine the budget for these outlets, effectively eliminating advertising as a significant source of income and potentially compromising their ability to maintain editorial independence.

Syrian legislation violates international human rights and press freedom, **contravening:**

- Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Freedom of opinion and expression, including seeking, receiving, and imparting information.⁴³
- Article 19, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media.⁴⁴
- Article 11, Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Principle of legal certainty, requiring clear and precise criminal laws to prevent arbitrary application.⁴⁵

Chapter Three: Human Rights Violations Against Syrian Journalists (2011-2024)

⁴¹ Amendments and Deletions: New Media Law Renews Fears Among Syrian Regime Journalists. Syria TV, March 10, 2024. Accessed November 17, 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/27fbnfdo>.

⁴² Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM). (2024). The New Media Draft Law in Syria 2024. <https://scm.bz/the-new-media-draft-law-in-syria-2024-ar/>.

⁴³ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Accessed September 2, 2024, from <https://www.un.org/ar/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

⁴⁴ United Nations. (1966). International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Retrieved September 2, 2024, from <https://tinyurl.com/yw29bm7e>.

⁴⁵ United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (2020, November 13). Communication concerning Law No. 7 on Combating Terrorism Offences in the United Arab Emirates. OL ARE 6/2020. Geneva: OHCHR.



For the past decade, Syria has been one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists, second only to the brutal targeting of reporters in occupied Palestine and the Gaza Strip by Israeli forces. Hundreds of journalists and civilians risk their lives to capture images, record videos, and file reports on the war. Many strive to ensure the flow of information reaches both Syrians and the international community, fearing that without their efforts, the atrocities and rampant corruption in the country will remain undocumented.

Since the onset of the popular uprising in **2011**, journalists have become the most vulnerable link in this tumultuous period, facing severe violations from all sides, including killings, torture, imprisonment, and kidnapping. Their struggles extend further, as assaults, verbal abuse, and temporary detentions have become daily realities they encounter while covering events on the ground.

The situation for journalists in Syria is dire, exacerbated by widespread restrictions that prevent them from entering certain areas. Those who dare to cover events in these regions face severe repercussions, including persecution, kidnapping, torture, and even murder.

Pluralism in the Syrian media landscape has been entirely stifled, both through brutal repression on the ground and through notorious laws that grant authorities unchecked powers to license and renew media operations. This has led to the closure of foreign media offices and the shutdown of local outlets that fail to align with the Baathist ideology of the Syrian regime, which is imposed as the sole narrative for survival.

Press freedom is equally compromised in areas outside the regime's control. In regions dominated by various armed factions, journalists and media outlets are coerced into adhering to propagandistic narratives, distorting the realities of opposing parties. They face immense pressure to abandon their profession or publish misleading information.

Syria's position in the Press Freedom Index (Table 1) highlights its status as one of the lowest-ranked countries globally in terms of press freedom. This ranking reflects the pervasive silencing and severe violations faced by journalists, both male and female, across the nation.

Table (1): Syria's Ranking in the Press Freedom Index by "Reporters Without Borders"



This chapter examines three primary violations— "killing," "arrest/kidnapping," and "journalists in exile"—to highlight the significant challenges faced by Syrian journalists and their impact on press freedom in the country. While these violations are particularly influential, it is important to acknowledge the effects of other violations as well.

- **Killing and Injury**

The killing of journalists in Syria has been a pervasive violation committed by various parties to the conflict, particularly by the Syrian regime. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, from March 2011 to May 2024, a total of 717 journalists



lost their lives in the ongoing violence. This grim toll includes 6 female journalists, 9 foreign journalists, and 53 individuals who died under torture.⁴⁶

The Committee of International Journalists has verified the deaths of 142 journalists and media workers while they were carrying out their duties from 2011 to 2023.⁴⁷ The Syrian Network further reports that 82% of violations against journalists and media workers over the past 14 years were perpetrated by the Syrian regime and its Russian ally, who are largely responsible for the death toll. Notably, the regime accounts for approximately 91% of fatalities due to torture in both official and unofficial detention centers, including:⁴⁸

Prominent Islamic Writer and Thinker Abdul-Kareem Al-Saqqā: On Tuesday, August 20, 2024, his family announced his death in Syrian government prisons. Al-Saqqā, arrested in 2011, had been missing for over 13 years. The announcement followed the family's recent receipt of a death certificate from the civil registry office in Daraya,⁴⁹ which listed his death as occurring in November 2014.

Writer Nasser Saber Bunduq: In February 2024, his family received official documentation confirming his death. The registration, dated March 5, 2014, indicates he died seventeen days after his arrest by the Syrian regime's Military Intelligence Division following a raid on his Sahnaya home in February 2014.⁵⁰

Journalist Safaa Al-Ahmad: In October 2024, Israel targeted and killed journalist Safaa Al-Ahmad⁵¹ in an airstrike on Damascus. This adds to the list of countries experiencing systematic Israeli attacks on journalists in Palestine and Lebanon.

⁴⁶ Syrian Network for Human Rights, "On World Press Freedom Day: Documenting the killing of 717 journalists and media workers since March 2011, including 53 due to torture by parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria," May 3, 2024, accessed November 17, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/23mcu9lb>.

⁴⁷ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024: Syria, accessed November 1, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2024>.

⁴⁸ Women Journalists Without Chains, Monitoring Unit.

⁴⁹ Death of the Non-violent Thinker Abdul-Kareem Al-Saqqā in the Prisons of the Syrian Regime." (2024, August 21). Alaraby. Retrieved November 18, 2024, from [<https://tinyurl.com/28pzcck7>].

⁵⁰ Suwayda24. (2024, February 10). Video of Writer Nasser Saber Bunduq [Video]. Twitter. Retrieved November 18, 2024, from <https://twitter.com/suwayda24/status/1756068857880453196?s=51>.

⁵¹ International Federation of Journalists. "Syria: Israeli Airstrike Kills State TV Anchor in Damascus." IFJ, 1 Oct. 2024, www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/syria-israeli-airstrike-kills-state-tv-anchor-in-damascus.



Ahmed Al-Hussein: He was killed in Daraa countryside in April 2023; ISIS militants were accused of his assassination.⁵²

Firas Al-Ahmad: This Sama TV correspondent died in August 2023 when an explosive device detonated in his car in Daraa countryside.⁵³

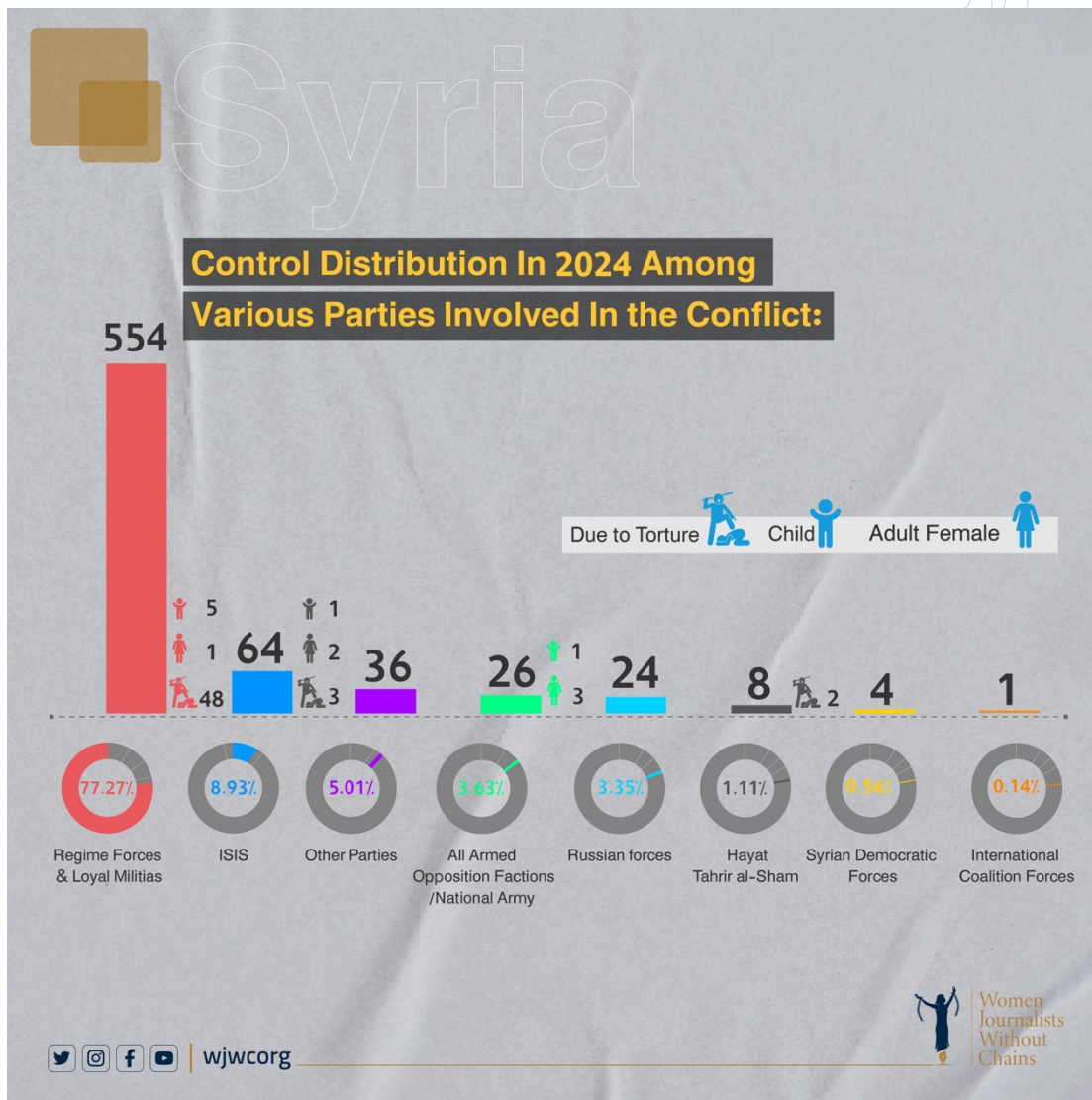
Mohammed Saeed Al-Kafri: He was killed in November 2023 in eastern Daraa Governorate by an armed group affiliated with the Syrian regime, following his participation in an anti-regime demonstration.⁵⁴

In addition, at least 1,612 people have been injured, with varying degrees of severity, by parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria since March 2011.

⁵² Syrian Journalists Association. (2023, Apr. 9). Continuing bleeding of media in Syria: New details about the assassination of media activist Ahmed Al-Hussein in Daraa. Retrieved November 17, 2024, from syja.org/archives/27215

⁵³ Sputnik Arabic. (August 9, 2023). Death of journalist Firas al-Ahmad and injury of Syrian TV cameraman in terrorist bombing. [Online article]. Retrieved {Date Accessed}, from <https://tinyurl.com/2dfj5r7m>.

⁵⁴ Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). (November 15, 2023). Activist Mahmoud al-Kafri killed by regime forces' fire east of Daraa governorate on 10-11-2023. [Online article]. Retrieved {Date Accessed}, from <https://tinyurl.com/2b2lbukd>.



• Arrest and Kidnapping

Between 2011 and 2024, the Syrian Network for Human Rights documented at least 1,358 cases of arrest and kidnapping involving journalists and media workers by various factions in the conflict. Among these, at least 486 individuals—comprising 9 women and 17 foreign journalists—remain in custody or have been forcibly disappeared.

A significant 81% of these cases involve individuals still imprisoned by the Syrian regime, totaling 392 journalists, including 8 women and 4 foreign journalists. Additionally, ISIS is reported to have forcibly detained 48 individuals, which includes 1 female journalist and 8 foreign journalists. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham has detained 15 people, while various armed opposition factions and the National Army account for



14 individuals, including 5 foreign journalists, who are either under arrest or have disappeared. Furthermore, 17 other individuals are held by the Syrian Democratic Forces.⁵⁵ Among the most recent arrests in the second half of this year:⁵⁶

Abdul Aziz Farhan al-Hassi: In October 2024, a security group affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham arrested media activist Abdul Aziz Farhan al-Hassi in Idlib city and took him to an unknown location.⁵⁷

Wahid Yazbek: In September 2024, the Syrian regime's security services arrested journalist Wahid Yazbek after he exposed fraud in the recent People's Assembly elections; he was released the next day, as reported on his Facebook page.⁵⁸

AFP journalist Bakr al-Qassem: A Syrian National Army military police patrol arrested him and his wife, journalist Nabiha Taha, in al-Bab (eastern Aleppo) in August 2024. The arrest, lacking a warrant or explanation, saw Nabiha Taha released within hours, but Bakr al-Qassem's status remains unclear.⁵⁹

Karam Talal Kliyeh: In June 2024, this media activist, who works with the Syrian Media Network, was arrested by opposition police in the northern countryside of Aleppo.⁶⁰

Berivan Fouad Ismail: Also in June 2024, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) arrested Berivan Fouad Ismail after raiding her home in the city of Amuda, located in the Hasakah countryside of northeastern Syria.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Syrian Network for Human Rights, previously cited.

⁵⁶ Women Journalists Without Chains, Monitoring Unit.

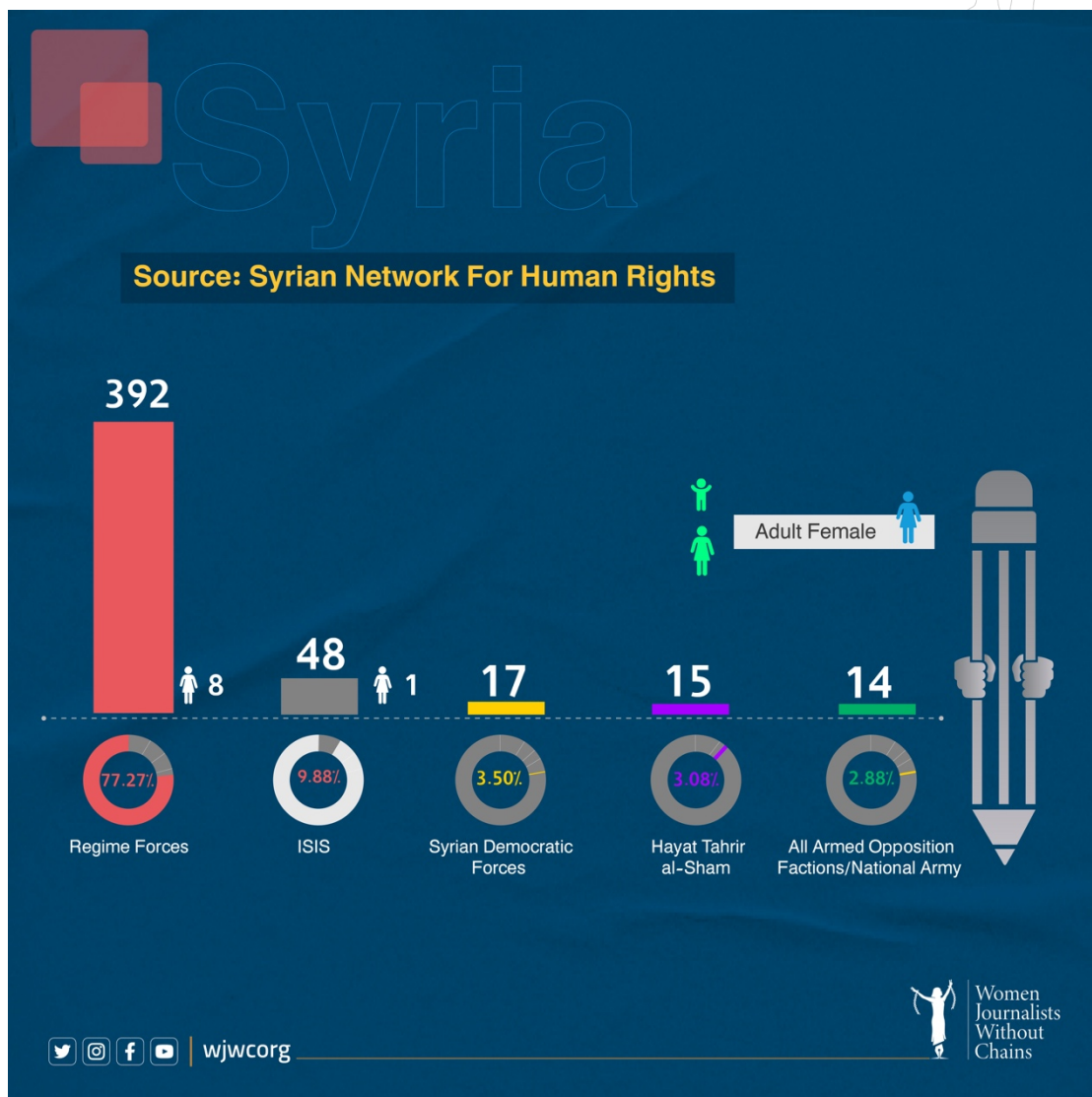
⁵⁷ Syrian Network for Human Rights. (2024, October 14). Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham Arrests Media Activist in Idlib (Published October 13, 2024). <https://tinyurl.com/27fas7zn>. Accessed November 18, 2024.

⁵⁸ Yazbek, Wahid. "Facebook Post." Facebook, 18 Sept. 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1069691588490118&set=a.554240313368584>. Accessed 18 Nov. 2024.

⁵⁹ Enab Baladi. (August 27, 2024). Demands for the release of a journalist arrested by the military police in eastern Aleppo. Retrieved November 18, 2024, from <https://tinyurl.com/24gx7944>.

⁶⁰ Syrian Media Network. (March 7, 2024). Retrieved November 18, 2024, from <https://tinyurl.com/2y3qd8ts>.

⁶¹ Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). (June 11, 2024). Syrian Democratic Forces arrest a journalist in the Kurdish National Council and a member of the Kurdistan Unity Party in Al-Hasakah Governorate. Retrieved November 18, 2024, from <https://tinyurl.com/2dkz2oyu>.



- **Safety of Exiled Journalists**

In a grim environment marked by the killing, kidnapping, and torture of journalists, many independent Syrian journalists have been compelled to flee their country and live in exile. This escape is a necessary measure to avoid severe threats to their lives and freedom, as they face ongoing intimidation and violence.

Hundreds of journalists have sought refuge in neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey to protect their lives and families while staying connected to their profession. However, they now face the looming threat of deportation back to Syrian authorities or areas controlled by other armed groups. Many have received threats indicating they could face the same fate—death or arrest—if returned.



Despite differing political rationales, four countries—Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon—have pursued policies aimed at deporting Syrian refugees. While often framed as "voluntary returns,"⁶² these initiatives reveal a common goal. Statements supporting Syrian refugee repatriation were issued by Iraqi and Jordanian foreign ministers in May 2023. Further evidence includes a May 2024 security agreement between Iraq and the Syrian regime involving the exchange of wanted individuals,⁶³ a Turkish plan for "integration and return"⁶⁴ revealed in July 2024, and a Lebanese government plan announced in August 2024 for refugee repatriation in coordination with the Syrian regime.⁶⁵

Chapter Four: Recommendations

The presence of independent journalists in Syria is crucial for protecting the public's right to know, particularly in conflict zones. Independent journalism fosters transparency and accountability, exposing potential violations by all parties and facilitating the flow of information to the international community, thereby raising awareness of human suffering and encouraging international action.

However, the future of press freedom in Syria faces significant challenges due to the ongoing war and internal divisions. The urgent need for strong, independent media outlets capable of providing reliable information, combating misinformation and hate speech, and exposing corruption is undeniable. This can only be achieved within a democratic framework that guarantees media freedom, protects journalists, and ensures their safety while reporting from the field.

Until such a framework is established, Women Journalists Without Chains recommends the following:

⁶² Jordanian, Saudi, Iraqi, and Egyptian Ministries of Foreign Affairs. (2023, May 1). Amman Statement stresses priority of ending Syrian crisis and its repercussions. Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates. <https://mfa.gov.jo/news/36189>. Accessed October 19, 2024.

⁶³ Al Araby. (May 12, 2024). Iraq and the Syrian regime sign a memorandum of understanding for joint security cooperation. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/23bnzrxq>.

⁶⁴ "Integration and Return": A two-stage plan for Syrian refugees in Turkey. Syria TV, July 14, 2024. Accessed November 19, 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/2dhn5f5u>.

⁶⁵ ACH Rights. (2024, September 12). Statement on the "Voluntary Return" plan proposed by the Lebanese Council of Ministers for Syrian refugees. [Online article]. ACH Rights. <https://www.achrights.org/2024/09/12/13674/>.



1. The Syrian Government and all parties to the conflict must:

- Protect journalists from targeting and attack, ensuring they receive the same protections as other civilians under international humanitarian law unless directly participating in hostilities.
- Prosecute and punish all criminals who commit violations against journalists, including murder, injury, torture, assault, arrest, and kidnapping.
- Immediately and unconditionally release all detained journalists and prisoners of conscience, restoring their dignity and that of their families, and ending censorship and the single-voice approach to ensure press freedom.
- Guarantee equal access to government media for all segments of society, free from partisan affiliation, to preserve pluralism.
- Ensure all citizens have safe access to social media, enabling free expression without fear of prosecution or censorship.
- Ensure that journalists are never targeted or attacked, affording them the same protections as other civilians under international humanitarian law unless directly participating in hostilities.
- Prosecute and punish all those who commit crimes against journalists, including murder, injury, torture, assault, arrest, and kidnapping.
- Immediately and unconditionally release all detained journalists and prisoners of conscience, restoring their dignity and that of their families, and ending censorship and the single-voice approach to ensure press freedom.
- Guarantee equal access to government media for all segments of society, free from partisan affiliation, to preserve pluralism.
- Guarantee all citizens safe access to social media, enabling free expression without fear of prosecution or censorship.
- Enact legislation that protects data privacy, consistent with the constitution and international law, and immediately cease widespread internet surveillance and the tracking and spying on journalists.
- Remove laws that criminalize criticism of public officials, recognizing that criticism is inherent to public service. Repeal articles granting the executive branch the power to interpret the actions of journalists and the media.
- Abolish penalties for publication under repressive laws (General Penal Code, Military Penal Code, Anti-Terrorism Law, Media Law, and Information Crimes

Law) and end the prosecution of journalists in specialized courts except in narrowly defined, exceptional circumstances.

- Adopt a media law, developed in consultation with stakeholders, civil society, and media experts, that regulates public and private media in accordance with international law. This law should eliminate unnecessary licensing requirements and permits for journalists and limit the power of official media institutions to protect their independence.
- End all forms of censorship and ensure that journalists are not prosecuted for their work. Laws protecting journalistic sources and prohibiting their disclosure must be enacted.

2- The international community and civil society organizations must:

- Work towards a political solution to the Syrian conflict that establishes a democratic state respecting press freedom.
- Protect Syrian journalists in neighboring countries from deportation or harm.
- Pressure both the official and de facto Syrian authorities to release detained journalists and investigate crimes against them, holding perpetrators accountable.
- Support organizations defending press freedom and human rights in Syria, provide legal aid to harassed journalists, and consider sanctions against those responsible for serious human rights abuses, including violations of press freedom.
- Engage Syrian authorities at all levels to promote press freedom and protect journalists; support Syrian journalists through safety and security training, skills enhancement, and resources; and show solidarity by publicly supporting them, denouncing abuses, and raising awareness of press freedom violations.
- Develop a strategy, in cooperation with Syrian organizations, to prosecute those responsible for the murder and kidnapping of journalists and ensure they are brought to justice.
- Provide support to journalists facing persecution, harassment, and pressure.
- Promote media independence through collaboration between civil society and independent journalism experts.