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INTERNET OR ENTER-NOT: THE SYRIAN EXPERIENCE



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Internet in Syria: a Recent History

On 24 February 1996 the Syrian Prime Minister authorised the Syrian Telecommunications Company (EST) to enter the internet age. He was encouraged to do so by Bashar Al-Assad, who was president of the Syrian Information Technology Association from 1995 to 1999 (before becoming President of Syria in 2000).

On 11 March 1996 the Prime Minister signed a collaborative agreement with the Association, whose president Al-Assad had “put such immense efforts into bringing the internet to Syria, and internet culture to all of Syrian society.”¹

Under the terms of this agreement, the two parties were to cooperate in implementing a pilot project that would allow public institutions to use the new communication technology of the internet. The project’s first objective was to assess the usefulness of the internet, its appropriateness for Syrian culture and any security issues related to its use. Although the evaluation was not very informative in terms of technical and economic usefulness, it appears to have occupied an important place in the minds of the project’s “pioneers” from the political arena. Those in power were already aware of the “dangerous nature” of this hard-to-control tool.

On 13 March 1996² the period of assessment resulted in a report on the technical and administrative aspects of Syria’s connection to the internet. Its authors concluded that “Syria should establish a connection as soon as possible”.³ They also listed the main reasons in favour of encouraging the Syrian authorities to allow their “subjects” to enter the virtual era. Among these justifications were the following⁴:

- the incalculable wealth of information and services available online for students and researchers, the internet having become a pillar of research worldwide, especially through online databases;
- the importance of the internet as a means of commercial promotion and electronic trade;
- the opportunities the internet provided for Syrian companies to promote their products and publicise Syria’s cultural history as well as its archaeological heritage and tourist attractions;
- the possibility of publicising and supporting the stance of the Syrian political establishment; defending the rights of Syrian internet users; correcting lies about Syria and repairing damage to its international image.

At its inception in 1997, the pilot project had a maximum capacity of 150 subscribers. Various authorities were connected – including the President’s departments, the Prime Minister, local and national leaders of the Ba’ath Party, ministries, military departments, state-owned companies and

* Salam Kawakibi is a political scientist.

¹ Hasna Askhita, in a speech given at the meeting of the “Network for the development of libraries in the Arab States”, Beirut, 2–4 March 2000.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

institutions, the universities, Arab and international organisations – as were news agencies, hospitals and chambers of commerce.

That same year an IT communications specialist, Amr Salem, published an article on the introduction of the internet to Syria⁵. Salem – “imported” from the United States and presented in the state media as a “manager” at Microsoft and “moderniser” – offered then- President Hafez Al-Assad his services in banning any new technology that might threaten the “security and stability of the country”. In 2006 he was appointed Minister of Communications and Technology.

⁵ Amr Salem, “Syria’s Cautious Embrace”, *Middle East Insight*, March-April 1999, pp. 49-50.

But what did Syrians do while waiting for their Leaders' Favour?

Given the climate of distrust in Syria vis-a-vis the new technology, Syrians in search of information instead used Lebanese, Jordanian and Turkish internet providers. Over 65,000 Syrians were “illegally” connected to the internet before the pilot project was implemented. This was expensive, which restricted it to the wealthy and led to a system of several persons making collective use of a single access point. Since the authorities were unable to control this practice, they banned it. Threats to users ranged from simply cutting off their phone line to being summoned to appear before one of the security services.

Human Rights Watch found that “until 1999, Syria was one of the rare countries in the world which was connected to the global internet network but did not allow its citizens to access it, in spite of official speeches and declarations praising this tool.”⁶ This was part of the political logic of a government wanting to prevent the development of an information source that might become a “danger”.

In early 1999 the pilot project was launched with the provision of email services inside the country. Soon afterwards the authorities also allowed access to international email and other services offered by the internet, such as browsing the web and file exchange via FTP (file transfer protocol). Two types of subscriptions were already available: email-only or email plus surfing the web. The authorities increased the number of those “entitled” to an internet connection and accepted subscriptions from private companies (both commercial and industrial), tourism agencies, doctors, engineers and lawyers. However, the process was still slow, since it entailed bureaucratic procedures to obtain papers that granted “legitimate” access to the internet. It also opened the door to a scam that involved people getting hold of documents certifying their membership of an “entitled” profession without actually practising it – thus adding a new outlet for corruption to the hundreds of very profitable outlets already in existence.

This widening of access also rendered a great service to educational establishments, where the national programme of IT teaching was being applied. Since its inception, the internet had been the sole domain of the EST, which is answerable to the Ministry of Communications and Technology. In 2001 the Syrian Information Technology Association entered the market with subscription offers that were more flexible, while still complying with the regulations – namely the requirement for users to belong to specific professions. As has been pointed out already, this “non-governmental” association for the promotion of IT and new technologies in Syria was chaired by Bashar Al-Assad before his accession to the country’s Presidency.

The year 2005 saw increasing growth in the internet sector with the arrival of two other private service providers on the market: Aya and CEC, along with the Italian satellite internet provider Best-Italia. In 2007, mobile-phone operators Areeba (later MTN) and Syriatel also entered the internet market. As a result, the Italian company had its contract suspended that same year.

⁶ hrw.org/arabic/1999/reports/internet/syria-tx.htm.

Words and Deeds

In 2006 Amr Salem, the Minister of Communications and Technology, stated his determination to distribute one million affordable computers with internet connection.⁷ He also proposed easier access to credit to encourage users. His third measure was to remove customs duties on IT hardware. Finally, the Syrian government envisaged creating several high-tech parks in Syria in order to attract foreign investment in IT and the internet.

In official speeches the government now frequently refers to wanting to develop IT and the internet. Specialist institutes are being created in every town. Universities have imposed special subjects in which students from all disciplines are taught the principles of computing. Specialist faculties have emerged from these same universities, and the state is starting to speak of e-government.

Partly for efficiency's sake, partly for appearance, all public corporations as well as the authorities have invested in IT and training their staff in its use. Managers as well as ministers appropriate IT jargon in their speeches. They frequently use IT tools in their presentations – even when they are not absolutely necessary.

As part of the government's drive to offer internet access to a maximum of users, in 2005 it permitted the sale of access cards without any restrictions as to the buyer's identity. However, broadband access is still reserved for the privileged, and especially for those who manage to obtain the approval of the security services. Requests for derogations from such approval have to be made to the management of the Syrian Telecommunications Company (EST).

In parallel with this proactive policy of spreading computer literacy and widening internet access, all forms of state control over IT have been reinforced. Until 2003 all international sites offering an email service were blocked. This was intended to force users to use only local providers, which made them easier to monitor. Since then, with the ban changing day to day seemingly on a lottery basis, it has been a game of cat and mouse. Some IT specialists have managed to bypass bans by using special software. But this has not been a widespread phenomenon that might enable the populace to rid itself of its "fear" of using addresses hosted abroad. And yet the business cards of many politicians feature email addresses hosted outside Syria by such providers as Yahoo! and Hotmail – another contradiction.

The use of free email sites became possible again. This "liberalisation" followed a major investment in sophisticated hardware that allowed the state to monitor email even on these sites. The authorities' highly sophisticated technology⁸ blocks access so effectively that even knowledgeable users have been unable to break through the barriers. According to "expert" observers, new machines imported from the Netherlands and Germany are able to monitor the entire process from the moment a user logs in, making it possible to know what sites the user visits, and when.

⁷ *Al-Hayat*, 15 April 2006, London.

⁸ www.islamonline.net, 23 May 2005.

What are the Criteria for Blocking Sites?

While the Minister of Communications and Technology claims that only 20 sites are banned in Syria, the Syrian Committee for the Defence of Democratic Freedoms and the Syrian Human Rights Committee⁹ stress that “more than 100 sites are on the black list either permanently or temporarily.”¹⁰

The list of banned sites is long, varied and flexible: long, because it contains an almost unlimited number of Arabic and foreign-language sites; varied, because it contains sites of a political, pornographic and generalist nature; and finally flexible, because it has no fixed criteria either for banning sites – except where they are Israeli or pornographic – or for authorising them.

A site may be banned on the simple say-so of the technician on duty or else any authority’s “over-riding decision”. Where Arabic sites are concerned, the ban above all involves sites that transmit the views of the Syrian opposition. Those sites are permanently blocked, whether they operate within Syria or abroad. Some of them – such as Thisissyria.com, close to the Islamist movement and based in London – distribute their content via email. Others rely on the ability of internet users to bypass the “barriers”. There is also a newsletter inundating the inboxes of Syrian subscribers that comes from those close to former Vice-President Abdulhalim Khaddam, one of the symbols of corruption and repression in Syria during his time in power. This fact is presented by some Westerners as being the embodiment of Syria’s democratic future. Those in charge of distributing the newsletter use dozens of email addresses to circumvent the barriers. In other words, the technical capability exists to stop “undesirable” emails from being sent. However, it is not automatically applied.

Any sites that publish the opinions of Kurdish political and cultural movements are banned. Another category to be added to this already long black list is political sites that frequently publish articles critical of the government, such as Elaph.com and Metransparent.net. The former is edited by Saudi journalists close to the new Arab liberal movement. Its Damascus correspondent is “tolerated” by the authorities, who frequently pass on statements on topical issues to her. The second site, coming out of Paris, is very critical of Syria’s policy. Its editors are Lebanese and close to the March 14 Alliance. A third banned site, www.ahewar.org, represents the ideas of the Arab secular movement in general and the Syrian secular movement in particular. Rezgar.com is a political site close to the Arab and Kurdish Left. Numerous Syrian writers and journalists express their views on its pages, just as numerous intellectuals in Syria regularly read its contents.

Syriamirror.com was a site for general information and reflection that not only disseminated protest writings and critical writings, but also attempted to mirror the general feeling of Syrian citizens on matters affecting them in all areas of life. Its editors decided to suspend it after being summoned several times to appear before the security services. They have done so using a powerful form of silent protest: the homepage shows a drawing of an old man bowing respectfully to the visitor and apologising on behalf of the editors.

⁹ A Syrian human rights organisation that is based in Damascus without being officially “legal”.

¹⁰ Communiqué distributed by this organisation in Damascus on 12 October 2006.

Alongside banned information-sites are press-sites which have at one time or another offended the authorities, as was the case with the Saudi newspaper *Al-Chark Al-Awsat* (the Middle East), published in London. After the newspaper was banned, its site was blocked as well. However, when the newspaper was allowed back onto the Syrian market, the site was not “de-blocked”. What is more, a Syrian Minister¹¹ regularly writes in *Al-Chark Al-Awsat*. Such inconsistency is not limited to this one example: it is also the case for the Lebanese daily *Al-Nahar* (The Day). This newspaper has been banned from sale in Syria for many years, but, paradoxically, its site is accessible! *Al-Nahar* represents an important window of expression for Syrian intellectuals, especially in its cultural section. By opening up its op-ed pages, it has allowed many writers and journalists access to a Syrian readership which was previously unaware of them, due to their work being banned in the Syrian press.

A category of websites which is absolutely “prohibited” is that of local and foreign human rights organisations. For the half dozen Damascus-based organisations, the internet is a very effective tool that enables them to issue news releases in an atmosphere of strictly controlled public expression. These organisations rely greatly on the internet, despite the bans and monitoring. Access to websites on the same topics but hosted abroad is often more strictly controlled because the authorities consider that, in spite of everything, local sites will practise a minimum of self-censorship and can be afforded a margin of tolerance. However, sites hosted abroad may well express “radical” opinions, taking advantage of the freedom of expression which they enjoy outside Syria’s borders.

The ban also affects sites expressing the views of “minorities”, especially Kurdish sites. Amude.com and Afrin.com are frequently visited by Syrian Kurdish internet users. They provide a forum of expression in either Arabic or Kurdish for Kurdish writers and friends of the Kurdish “cause”.

From time to time, another form of unexpected sanction strikes information-sites considered “unofficial”. This was the case of Syria-news.com and Champress.net. The former – which was long linked to the son of the former Defence Minister Mustafa Tlass but has now been “sold on” to others close to the authorities – has been shut down several times, for several days at a time. These closures are often related to the publication of information or an article that offends the authorities. The second site, edited by Ali Jamalo – a member of the Ba’ath party who is very close to several “security decision-makers” – has also been banned for a few days. Both sites have been forced to change domains or else negotiate their return onto the web.

The ban is therefore not reserved for opposition sites, but can also strike government-friendly sites.

The most telling example is that of Allforsyria.com, which has been edited since 2003 by Ayman Abdellnour, a young engineer and member of the Ba’ath Party. He presents himself as being very close to the President of Syria. He is also considered a representative of the reformist faction in the “young guard”, which is composed of young technocrats close to the President. His site has been banned since 2005, but bypasses this ban by sending its content daily and for free to more than 17,000 subscribers.

¹¹ Boutheina Chaabane, Minister of Emigration, who is radically opposed to political change and accuses opponents of being “traitors” in the pay of Americans.

Through this site, Ayman Abdelnour has played an important role in the political use of the internet. The project began with substantial press dossiers on Syria that brought together writings from the national and foreign press. Then the site published articles written specifically for its bulletin. It has since gained some notoriety and influence on the domestic political scene. For some, it has become a disruptive element. Its ban highlights internal conflicts in the Ba'ath Party between the "reformist" and Orthodox factions.

Site bans depend not only on political will, but also on the willingness of each of the four ISPs. CEC, for example, often blocks sites that it considers "a danger to the ethical principles of society". Syrian internet users are therefore not only the victims of a repressive state logic that seeks both to channel their desires and to manipulate the information they receive. They are also subject to censorship by the "ethics watchdogs" that are mushrooming in a society which, for many decades, has been used to submitting to authority.

However, this does not appear to be the opinion of the Syrian Minister of Communications and Technology, who claims in an interview with Allforsyria.com¹² that "he is neither for nor against the policy of banning websites [...]. In principle, there is not a single state which is entirely laissez-faire. Our Ministry is not the only one responsible for the content of sites. We are responsible for the service. There is also the Ministry of Information, and, where the subject touches on religion, the Ministry of Religious Endowments. Some writings are harmful [...]. The number of banned sites is very limited. Some speak of a long list, but this list does not exist. The number of banned sites does not exceed 20"¹³!

Website bans are not the product of a socio-cultural policy or a desire to "protect adolescents" from some "harmful" influence. Rather, they are about muzzling free expression and controlling access to information.

The precarious situation of the majority of sites that broadcast from Syria prevents them from profiting from advertising resources. Advertisers are risk-averse, and do not seek out web pages that are "not recommended" by the authorities.

¹² As we have seen, this site is banned, but sends its content but email!

¹³ www.allforsyria.com, 22 May 2007.

Blogging is a Matter of State

Blogging culture is little developed in Syria. Blogs are few in number and do not offer an alternative source of information, because of close state scrutiny and internet users' fear of punishment by some authority or other.

Ayman Haykal¹⁴, a young businessman close to the government, decided to found an association of "Syrian bloggers" gathering together the Syrians active in this area. He himself admits that young people are "afraid of the written word and its repercussions, which leads people to use pictures instead of texts in the limited number of blogs".¹⁵

Syrian bloggers are cautious about expanding their activities. The majority of blogs avoids political issues and is content to exchange opinions on social life and on the thorny issues surrounding relationships between men and women in a conservative society. In early October 2006¹⁶ the BlogSpot site was blocked by the authorities, depriving Syrian web users of millions of blogs hosted by Google Blogger. It was not the first time that the authorities blocked sites, but this time the "damage" to a domain highly coveted by thousands of internet users was extensive.

However, Syrians living abroad, especially young people and Kurds, are increasingly publishing blogs – witness the blog of the Syrian sociologist Burhan Ghalioun, who lives in Paris. He regularly publishes articles on the site, which is a benchmark for a large number of users interested in the topics he deals with: democratisation, reform, Islamism, etc. The Syrian authorities have blocked access to this blog because of the quality and the boldness of the debate that it provokes, and because Burhan Ghalioun is one of the precursors of the "Damascus Spring".

The experience of bloggers influencing the political scene, as in Egypt, is not yet on the horizon in Syria. Political protesters only rarely use this means of expression. They prefer to create websites that offer only a very limited possibility for readers to comment on their contents. On the other hand, this allows more in-depth thinking on certain subjects, without giving in to undue haste or the need to provoke a debate at all costs.

¹⁴ www.damasceneblog.com.

¹⁵ Joshua Landis, "The Blogging Association of Syria", faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/05/blogging-association-of-syria.htm (visited on 11 October 2006).

¹⁶ *PR-Media*, November 2006, Damascus.

Prisoners of Virtual Politics

A new category must be added to the panoply of political prisoners in Syria: internet prisoners arrested because of their beliefs. The “offences” of these users – expressing themselves or circulating information and analyses online that threaten the wall of silence and the culture of fear – attract the same indictments and sentences as oral or written “crimes”.

Arrests and prosecutions frequently occur after the broadcasting or publication of an article in conjunction with a Syrian news item. Whether the article was published on a “hostile” or “friendly” website has no influence on how its author is treated, which is based more on the article itself than the means of dissemination. Articles on the site of a newspaper considered “friendly” may be banned, as has been the case with *Al-Safir*¹⁷ (Assafir.com) and *Al-Akhbar*¹⁸ (Al-akhbar.com) a number of times. Circulating “suspect” articles can expose their author to various sanctions.

The following are some of the prisoners of the internet:

Mohamed Ghanem, writer and teacher, was arrested on 31 March 2006 and sentenced on 6 June to one year in prison without parole because of his writings on his website, Syrianes. The site published articles criticising the state of civil liberties as well as debates regarding the thorny issue of the Syrian Kurds.

Abdelrahman Al-Chaghouri was arrested in 2003¹⁹ after sending an article from Thisissyria.net via his email²⁰. He was tried for “disseminating false information, distorting Syria’s image and threatening national security”, and eventually released on 31 August 2005.²¹

Masoud Hamid was arrested on 24 July 2004²² after publishing pictures of a demonstration of Kurdish children in Damascus on the Kurdish site Amude.com. He was sentenced to five years in prison without parole. On 7 December 2007²³ Reporters without Borders awarded him its prize.

In June 2004²⁴ the State Security Court sentenced Haytham Kotaych to four years imprisonment along with his brother, the actor Mohannad, to three years and the journalist Yehya Aws to two years, all without parole. They had been charged with “disseminating false information” after sending multiple articles to sites in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The activist Habib Saleh was arrested on 29 May 2005²⁵ because of articles he had published on the Web. He was sentenced to three years in prison without parole.

¹⁷ Leftwing Lebanese daily which does not have the reputation of being hostile to Syria, but which is beginning to open its op-ed pages to Syrian anti-Establishment intellectuals.

¹⁸ Lebanese daily which embodies the alliance between anti-Establishment Left and Hezbollah.

¹⁹ Amnesty International, 12 March 2004.

²⁰ Close to the Islamist movement and based in London.

²¹ www.hrinfo.net/mena/rsf/2005/pr0913.shtml.

²² www.web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ARAMDE240542005?open&of=ARA-2MD.

²³ www.hrinfo.net/mena/rsf/pr040722.shtml.

²⁴ www.hrinfo.net/press/04/pr040726.shtml.

²⁵ www.hrinfo.net/mena/aodepf/2005/pr0529.shtml.

Indictments and sentences against online publications are commonly based on the following items:

- obtaining information that must remain secret in order to preserve Syria's national security;
- obtaining writings not authorised by the government and which expose Syrians and Syria to hostile action;
- obtaining writings which may harm Syria's relations with a foreign country;
- disseminating false information;
- harming Syria's image abroad.

A special feature of this approach is to encourage internet users to contribute to censoring and monitoring the web. They are called upon to report sites to the authorities that they consider dangerous. In this context, it is also possible for users to protest against a website ban, provided they fill out a short form that contains their name, address and phone number.

What Future for the Internet in the Freeze on Expression?

During the last legislative elections in April 2007, some candidates used the internet to showcase their photos rather than their manifestos – because manifestos have not existed in Syrian political culture since 1963. They asked webmasters to create sites that might enhance their political “image”: a few phrases and a lot of photos, in the tradition of the slogans on billboards. Only certain sites allowed visitors to ask questions about the candidate’s “projects” for his “voters”. The use of the internet was particularly prevalent among “young” candidates, but some “old” candidates also discovered this new tool for personal promotion. The elections thus prompted webmasters to create sites such as Syrianparlement.com, Parlementsya.com, Voiceofsyria.com, etc.

The editor of Voiceofsyria.com declared that “the traditional tools of electoral advertising are outdated. Using the internet is inexpensive compared to distributing printed photos, placards and leaflets”.²⁶ However, online advertising for candidates in elections is only a fad, like erecting tents on the main squares of large cities where candidates offer drinks, music and songs – without, however, putting in an appearance to discuss their “projects” and “manifestos”. In other words, using the internet for these ends moves it further away from its main interest as a tool of communication, information and debate.

Despite its precarious state, the internet in Syria remains an effective tool for expressing political, cultural and social protest. The political opposition has used the internet to circulate its bulletins and statements – relatively efficiently, too, within the limits of what is possible.

For instance, petitions on a number of topics have been circulated, and have collected signatures, online. The Damascus Spring Committee and the Committee for the Rehabilitation of Civil Society, two movements which incarnate much of the domestic anti-Establishment culture, have resorted to the Web to publish their debates, opinions and statements.

Two significant political events of the past two years have resonated far and wide thanks to the internet, despite the limitations and restrictions placed on it: the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change in October 2005 and the Beirut-Damascus/Damascus-Beirut Declaration in April 2006. Both documents were widely circulated online and collected signatories. Virtual forums have been replacing the ones that Syrians were familiar with at the beginning of the 21st century, at the time of the Damascus Spring and other short-lived democratic inspirations.

The internet also remains a preferred medium for the circulation of petitions and denunciations. Information about the arrest and conviction of political activists can only be communicated by this medium since the other media avoid “meddling” in such “business”.

Intellectuals take advantage of this new space to escape the hold of the state cultural authorities. They attempt to confront, for example, the development of religious sites flooding the Web. Numerous are the poets, novelists and essayists who use the internet to publish their censored texts,

²⁶ *Al-Bayan*, 15 April 2007, Dubai (UAE).

or texts which simply did not meet with the publishers' approval. Sites such as Jidar.com and Alawan.com publish the writings of Syrians and other Arabs, as well as translations of texts that have influenced global cultural debate.

The virtual life and real life of Syrians have one characteristic in common: isolation. Syrians continue to live under the law of silence. Until further notice, their fate appears to be confirmed: to live on the margins of advances in web technology. A minority which is "enlightened" spends a lot of time running after technical solutions in order to access banned sites, create a blog or simply access email.

Faced with criticism about the state of freedom of expression in Syria, the authorities turn a deaf ear. They accuse domestic protesters of reflecting the will of "Western forces seeking to damage Syria's image at the very moment that she is confronting imperialist and colonial projects". The penalties are severe because it is supposedly still not "the right time to criticise the situation even if the criticisms are justified". This pretext has been used for decades, and the moment for "free public expression" still has not arrived. Thus, any criticism from abroad is considered interference in national affairs and denounced as such.

In countries where democracy is lacking, the internet nonetheless represents a technological escape route for social, cultural and political issues. "In the real world, we live below the political poverty line. Fortunately in the virtual world, the situation is reversed."²⁷

²⁷ Yassin Haj Saleh, www.rezgar.com, 31 October 2006.

About the Author

Salam Kawakibi is a researcher in political and social science. He is a senior researcher at Arab Reform Initiative and the University of Amsterdam. His main interests are media, civil societies, international relations and human rights in the Arab countries. He also has written many articles on European and Arabic media and books. He is an appointed trainer in human rights and international human law. Furthermore, he is Associate Researcher for IREMAM Aix-en-Provence and GREMMO Lyon, collaborating with IFRI in Paris. Mr. Kawakibi is formally educated in economics, international relations, international humanitarian law, international human rights, and political science.

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