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## THE PRIVATE MEDIA IN SYRIA



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# The Private Media in Syria



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## Recent History

The constitution of the Ba'ath Party stipulates that “freedom of expression, assembly, religion and artistic expression” must be protected, preserved and defended, and that “no authority has the right to restrict or repress them”.<sup>1</sup> The party, which has been in power in Syria since 8 March 1963, quickly declared a state of emergency, thus suppressing “until further notice”<sup>2</sup> the publication of the majority of newspapers, allegedly to preserve and consolidate “the general interest”. *Al-Baath*, *al-Wahda* and *Baradâ* were the only newspapers authorised to continue publishing.

This decision was taken so that “the government would have the right to control newspapers, books, radio broadcasts, advertising and television”.<sup>3</sup> From then on, all forms of publication were subject to prior approval by the relevant authorities, which could suppress, confiscate and destroy any work they considered a threat to national security, since every publication had to be compatible with the proclaimed principles of the Revolution.

The years passed, and the veterans of revolutionary ideology continue to legitimise this censorship. Very recently, eminent journalists of the Party justified the “suppressive” approach with the following argument: the press affected by it “was supporting retrograde forces and seeking to further its own interests given that it encouraged [Syria] to break off with Egypt. [...] It was working for big money and the international oil monopolies”. In the party's view, it was therefore normal to “suppress private titles so that the popular media could remplace them and speak with the voice of the people”. Since the Party considers itself to be the embodiment of the nation's interest, this gives it the legitimacy to proscribe all forms of private publication that do not serve its interest, i.e. “the nation's interest”. There is no longer “any need for private newspapers or media that propagate liberal ideas or work for the narrow interests of a few individuals or exploiters. The media are now dedicated to serving the objectives of society”.<sup>4</sup>

To tighten the state's stranglehold, on 27 May 1963 the Ministry of Information created the Society for the unity of printing and publishing. It began publishing the newspaper *al-Thawra* (The Revolution) on 1 July 1963 to stand alongside the Party's official mouthpiece, the newspaper *al-Baath*.

According to the decree that launched *al-Thawra*, the newspaper was to “apply the nationalist method of socialist construction and in this way participate in the renaissance, renewal and enrichment of the progressive Arab heritage in literature and science”.<sup>5</sup> Next the government turned its attention to journalism as a profession, and in 1965 decided to organise it by passing a law that put in place trades-union regulations.

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<sup>1</sup> Constitution of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party.

<sup>2</sup> “Declaration of the Revolution”, *al-Munâdil*, Damascus, 1965.

<sup>3</sup> Communiqué published in *al-Baath*, 13 March 1963.

<sup>4</sup> Turkî SAQİR, *La loi et les médias...*, Damascus, Dâr Ya'rub, 1988, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Decree 48 of 27 May 1963 founding the company which publishes the newspaper.

The media policy that was drawn up by the Ba'ath Party was adopted by the government authorities. The propaganda system was boosted by a multitude of tools under the very strict control of the government, or rather of its offshoots, which tried to give the impression that the government was not directly implicated. This method – reinforced by ideology and protected by a powerful security apparatus – accompanied the changes that had occurred at the head of the government, without those changes in their turn making any real difference to the organisation of institutions or their practice (except through clientelism).

With the arrival in power of Hafez al-Assad in 1970, a feeling of openness pervaded the political scene. The Correction Movement of 16 November 1970 put an end to the Party's in-fighting by tilting the balance of power towards the so-called moderate wing. For that reason, the new government gave a lot of weight to the role of information in its quest to control society. This process began in 1970 with the creation of a Press Institute under the supervision of the Ministry of Information. This Institute was the first establishment in Syria's history for training professional journalists, albeit with a degree course biased by propaganda.

The openness of the Correction Movement is described by É. Picard as “the most widely acknowledged characteristic of the Syrian regime from 1970 onwards. [...] It operated concurrently in the economic sector, on the inter-Arab and international levels, and inside the Syrian political sphere. In each case, it hit certain snags, but it appeared most debatable in the social and political sphere”.<sup>6</sup> Since the press was part of the political sphere, it too benefited from a timid openness, but the return of titles suspended upon the Ba'ath Party's arrival in power in 1963 was far from guaranteed, with the media staying under the political authorities' tight control. Nonetheless, certain journalists of Communist or Nasserian allegiance, who had previously been unable to exercise their profession, did reappear. This move was the result of a process undertaken by Hafez al-Assad in order to broaden his alliances and reinforce his power. He stated his belief in a system of wider political participation in which “nobody will be questioned on his principles, beliefs or political convictions as long as he practises them within the framework of the law and the Constitution”.<sup>7</sup>

The new constitution, proclaimed in 1973, stated that “each citizen has the right to express his opinions publicly and freely in speech, in writing or by any other means. He thus has the right to participate in monitoring and constructive criticism in order to guarantee national security and support for the socialist regime”.<sup>8</sup> This text strengthened the hand of the tolerated political parties and encouraged them to demand more space for expression in the media. Flying in the face of this hope, the Minister of Information<sup>9</sup> categorically refused to accept a press that did not obey to the letter the policy established by the party in power. Article 3 of the Minister's regulations therefore stipulated that “the Ministry's mission is to use all media tools to enlighten public opinion, confirm Arab nationalist orientation within the country and strengthen relations with Arab and friendly countries, following the principles of the Ba'ath Party and State policy”. Following the same logic, the sixth congress of the Ba'ath Party's regional leadership called on militants to “exert themselves so that the

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<sup>6</sup> Élisabeth PICARD, « La Syrie de 1949 à 1979 », in André RAYMOND, *La Syrie d'aujourd'hui*, Paris, éditions du CNRS, 1980, p. 169.

<sup>7</sup> Hâni' KHALILI, *Hâfiz al-Asad, l'idéologie révolutionnaire et la pensée politique*, Damascus, Dâr Tilâs, 1987, p. 144.

<sup>8</sup> Paragraph 32 of the constitution.

<sup>9</sup> *Al-Thawra*, 24 December 1975.



news would be engaged in all areas”<sup>10</sup>, the looked-for engagement being one that did not deviate from the party line.

Although the government resisted the demands formulated by its allies for a certain amount of freedom of expression, this did not prevent permitted political parties from distributing their publications to their membership by subscription. This method of expression was tolerated because the number of readers was limited. However, the publications were closer in nature to pamphlets than real newspapers.

In October 1975, the newspaper *Tichrîn* (October) was published. The recruitment of journalists increased, breaking the Party members’ monopoly over the other two newspapers, *al-Thawra* and *al-Baath*. *Tichrîn* was the new – if ephemeral – window through which Communists<sup>11</sup> and liberals<sup>12</sup> were able to express themselves without undermining the state-controlled news system: a sort of channelling of the protest movement. In its first issue, *Tichrîn* declared categorically that it adhered to the politics of its colleagues *al-Baath* and *al-Thawra*, and claimed to fulfil an educational role “by improving citizens’ political consciences [...] and encouraging scientific and literary research”.<sup>13</sup> This approach was the result of a government policy of developing modern tools to improve supervision and suppression.

The way in which foreign affairs were presented by the press was defined by the government as being “the voice of the Arab Revolution. [...] The Palestinian Revolution, which is part of our Arab Revolution, deserves wholehearted support. [...] Thus, the hopes and the struggle of liberation movements all over the world must be echoed in our press”.<sup>14</sup> Domestically, the press had to respond to demands by the people for “information on how [the people] were implementing the revolution, its sentiments, dreams and ideas”. News thus had to be “revolutionary, free and marked by a progressive militantism that denounces the enemies of the State and of the people”.<sup>15</sup> To avoid drifting off-message, professionals resorted to strict self-censorship. In the same context, the newspaper *al-Thawra* stressed the educational and moral role of news, which was supposed to “develop the individual’s good qualities, refresh his thoughts and reconstruct his personality”. Such a press needed to be founded on “morality, patriotism and humanism”, and combat “the values of feudal, bourgeois and retrograde society”.<sup>16</sup>

There were various levels of self-censorship: the journalist’s; the section editor’s; and finally the editor-in-chief’s, who wanted to avoid any blunders. However, newspaper issues were still examined by a political service of the Ministry of Information. Even so, writings that criticised domestic affairs were allowed, notably in the social, administrative and economic spheres. Journalists sheltered behind Hafez al-Assad’s express will, which ordered “administrations and all those in power to open their doors to journalists. They must answer all their questions so that the answers may be conveyed to the people”. Even though the President emphasised that “freedom of the press is part of the

<sup>10</sup> Sixth congress of the regional leadership of the Ba’ath Party, April 1975.

<sup>11</sup> The writers Walîd Mi’mârî, Chawqî Baghdâdî, Nâdiya Khust and Muhammad al-Maghût.

<sup>12</sup> The novelist Colette Khûrî.

<sup>13</sup> SAQÎR, *op. cit.*, [6], p. 76.

<sup>14</sup> Ahmad KORNI, *Hâfiz al-Asad*, tome 2, Aleppo, no publisher, 1984, p. 338.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Adnân ABÛ FÂKHİR, *La presse syrienne entre théorie et pratique*, Damascus, Dâr al-Kitâb al-‘arabî, 1985, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> *Al-Thawra*, 4 March 1978.

freedom of the nation and the people”,<sup>17</sup> journalists worked in such a way as to avoid sanctions. Sanctions imposed on journalists who did step out of line ranged from verbal intimidation to physical violence, and even preventative detention for their beliefs.

Press control was relatively lenient from 1970 to 1978, the year that saw a rise in the armed protests of the Muslim Brotherhood, with an increase in bombings. Despite the religious nature of this protest movement, left-wing militants also participated in it in order to claim political rights. In the beginning, the government listened, organising public debates with intellectuals of all political leanings, which some journalists tried to relay and comment on. The government also wanted to appease political protesters by winning over the Left in its battle against Islamism. But the overture was quickly brought to an end: the editor-in-chief of *al-Baath* was transferred and several journalists suspended. This move led to intellectuals signing a petition at the end of 1978 that denounced the repressive measures inflicted on the press and literary publications.

Even those closest to the government were not spared, such as Amîd al-Khûlî, editor-in-chief of *Tichrîn*, who was dismissed following his editorial commenting on the 1987 Amman Summit (Jordan).<sup>18</sup> And yet there was a certain amount of tolerance for low-circulation publications of a theoretical nature that reflected the thought processes of the Left. This was the case with the reviews *al-Nahj* (The Path) and *Dirâsât ishtirâkiyya* (Socialist Studies). Journalists who belonged to a trade union were given tax and housing advantages according to their degree of loyalty, with a policy of co-optation also being put in place to reduce protests. The government was thus able to neutralise a large part of the intelligentsia by offering them promotions, with most journalists and writers becoming civil servants in the press, in secondary and higher education, and even in censorship. This administrative dependence was for many years one of the main methods of controlling journalistic work. The most committed protesters, on the other hand, went into exile.

The three official newspapers together printed no more than 100,000 copies per day, only half of which were sold, the remainder being distributed for free within the civil service. In a statement to a Lebanese newspaper, the Minister of Information stressed this weakness: “We do not have real media. All we have are three dailies with a circulation of 60,000 [*sic*] each. Half of those copies are unsold, because the newspapers are failing”.<sup>19</sup> From that moment on, numerous Syrian journalists found an outlet in the Lebanese press, whose distribution in Syria is erratic, since it is subject to the censors’ whims. For example, selling the daily *al-Nahâr* (The Day) is strictly forbidden in Syria, and even *al-Safîr* (The Ambassador) and *al-Akhabâr* (The News), considered ideologically close to Damascus, have at times been withdrawn or had their distribution delayed. The Syrian state tolerates this little window of expression still available to those who cannot publish in their own country as a safety valve and a means of monitoring the protest movement. That does not, however, prevent the authorities from accusing those who write in the Lebanese press of “contact with the enemy” and of being “hired pens”.

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<sup>17</sup> *Tichrîn*, 18 April 1978 and 20 August 1977.

<sup>18</sup> Conference of Arab Heads of State, 8–11 November 1987, with two conversations between Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein.

<sup>19</sup> *Al-Nahâr*, 16 June 2000.

## The Third Millennium: Ushering in Real Change?

Following Bashar al-Assad's accession to the Presidency in 2000, the timid and tightly controlled opening up of the media started to flag. Parties which were members of the National Progressive Front were granted permission to sell their publications at newspaper stands, but the one newspaper that managed to distinguish itself by a more critical tone than the official press was the mouthpiece of a branch of the Communist Party: *al-Nûr* (The Light), a weekly that also carried contributions by independent figures. The newspapers of the other parties remained practically non-existent and contented themselves with echoing the official line in its most rudimentary form.

A new publishing law was passed in 2001, which allowed the private sector to re-enter the media industry, having been banned from it since 1963. Since then, over 250 publications have been approved. Few of them appear regularly, with only 25 to 30 being effectively published, which leaves plenty of room for a black market in approval permits. The sums changing hands are close to 5 million Syrian pounds (330,000 euros) per permit, with the actual cost not exceeding 25,000 pounds (16,000 euros). However, the relatively high number of approved publications since 2001 provides the Ministry of Information with an argument in its favour, which it uses every time the media situation in Syria is discussed. The media landscape has also been broadened by dozens of radio stations as well as two TV channels. However, even though the new law does not impose censorship as a prerequisite, it does remain very repressive and contains an arsenal of restrictions that complicate the work of journalists. It also affects all other forms of publication in Syria and entering the country from abroad, as well as printing presses, with sanctions ranging from fines to imprisonment.

The first newspaper to benefit from this glimmer of openness was a satirical one: *al-Dûmarî* (The Scout), published by Alî Farzât, the renowned caricaturist. Its editor claims to have had the support of the Syrian President for the launch of his publication and to have been given a free hand as to which taboo subjects he might tackle. But the adventure was short-lived, since the newspaper was suspended on the Prime Minister's orders on 28 July 2003. In the tradition of *Le Canard enchaîné*, the newspaper contained articles, enquiries and cartoons denouncing corruption in society – albeit cautiously. But it was also used to settle scores in the manner of the British tabloids, a fault that can be ascribed to the lack of professionalism which pervades the profession.

*Abyad wa aswad* (Black and White), the only private political magazine, was launched in early 2001, with the son of one of the country's high-ranking officers as its owner. In spite of its meagre content, the magazine has managed to make a name for itself (by default). It covers Syrian domestic affairs in a barely critical vein, devoting dossiers to topics that were previously considered too sensitive, such as Syria's political parties.

In 2006, *al-Watan* (The Motherland) presented itself as the “first independent Syrian political daily for four decades”. *Al-Watan* is three years old, and its editor-in-chief considers his project a “political and financial adventure, with the launch of the first private political newspaper in Syria in four decades”.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Al-Khalij*, 10 January 2009, United Arab Emirates.

But rumours link him to a member of the President's family. In the beginning, the paper opened its columns to editorials by independent intellectuals often banned from the official press. This practice was soon stopped, however, and the newspaper became a fourth version of its official colleagues. With the exception of its more modern format and its better adapted journalistic terminology, al-Watan is scrupulous about toeing the official editorial line. Worse, the newspaper behaved deplorably in denouncing certain independent intellectuals, which included publishing a list of Syrians accused of having written for the Israeli press or, at least, of having been used by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But the intellectuals concerned went to court and won their case.

*Chabâblek*, a monthly magazine for the Syrian youth, was first published on 27 September 2004. Despite respecting the Ministry's terms and conditions, it had a precarious existence, first being banned from sale and then from circulation. For example, issue 47 (May 2009) published a reader's letter declaring that he "would not return to Syria because of its military service", a sentence the censors considered an attack on "national sentiment". Issue 49 suffered the same fate because of a piece about the Facebook website being banned by the Syrian authorities, while issue 52 (October 2009) was removed from circulation because of an audacious dossier on the state of the private press in Syria. Since then, the editor-in-chief has decided to suspend publication by way of protesting against the verbal orders which poison the life of the press.<sup>21</sup>

In appearance, there are many indicators of an increased openness: the number of private of publications, radio stations and television channels. But closer scrutiny of the way that the media actually function gives a better understanding of this distinctively Syrian "static reform". For instance, the majority of press titles deal with economics and social life.

The teaching of journalism is limited to one section of the literature faculty of the University of Damascus. In 1987 this section was called the "Press Section", but this was recently modified to "Information Section". The subjects taught date from the 1970s, with theory-based lessons given by lecturers who have never really known the world of current affairs. During the university year, students take courses in political sociology, history, philosophy and psychology. They graduate with a little knowledge of each of these subjects without having any mastery of the news sector, and therefore mostly swell the ranks of the unemployed. The private media rarely employ these students, having no confidence in their competence. With a bit of luck and support, some graduates manage to land jobs in the public sector and thus add to the hundreds of executives without real responsibility who clog the corridors of the public television station and official newspapers.

This situation generates a lack of professionalism. The new generation of private-sector journalists often blends investigative work with libellous denunciation. In some relatively open areas, these journalists play the part of the law in corruption scandals, but without really defending the requirements of transparency and the constitutional state. As a result, the financial press has above all become a tool for blackmail and denunciation.

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<sup>21</sup> On 26 October 2009. Since then, the website [www.scm-sy.net](http://www.scm-sy.net) is no longer accessible. The activities of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression can be found at [www.anhri.net/syria/scm/2009/pr1026.shtml](http://www.anhri.net/syria/scm/2009/pr1026.shtml).

A poll carried out by students from the Information Section of the University of Damascus on the much used expression “paroles de journaux” [*newspaper words*], meaning news without foundation, found that 86 out of the sample of 100 Syrians considered the expression a fair representation of the quality of news coverage, with 64% having no confidence at all in the Syrian press.

As for private radio stations, permits have been issued for commercial music stations, which can, however, also cover societal items. Dozens of radio stations were created – mostly in Damascus and Aleppo – and successfully managed to capture the advertising market previously dominated by Lebanese radio picked up in Syria. To begin with, presenters adopted a Lebanese accent to attract audiences that were used to following commercial broadcasts from the other side of the border. Programming was entirely devoted to music, with commentary restricted to a few links. Then the stations widened their activities to include broadcasts on a variety of subjects, all of them strictly non-political. They also increasingly focused on the young and on female listeners. Recently, they have become interested in public debates on such issues as the draft legislation on personal status, honour killings and public services. This experiment is gradually developing, with an emphasis on daily life and the needs of the majority of the population, and without venturing onto the political scene, which continues to be the strict reserve of public radio: *Sawt al-chaab* (The Voice of the People), *Sawt al-chabâb* (The Voice of Youth) and Radio Damascus.

The parallel development of television offers another window, with private TV channels alongside the public ones (the first and second channel, the satellite channel, the fiction channel). Even though there has been talk of dozens of requests for approval, only three private channels exist: *al-Dunyâ* (The World), broadcast from Syria; *al-Machriq* (The Orient) and *Cham* (Syria) broadcast from Dubai and Cairo respectively. These last two have been in financial and administrative difficulties with the authorities – difficulties which might well conceal an intention to carry out a political hijacking of the channels.

Referring to the level of independence of his channel, *al-Dunyâ*'s director insists that “we are independent in our work and broadcast from the free zone in Damascus. As a result, our channel is treated like a foreign channel, and there is no censorship either of our programmes or of our news, not even our political news. [...] The channel is financed by seven well-known businessmen, and our financing is not in any way linked to the State”.<sup>22</sup> This statement lost all credibility as soon as the owners' names were made public: businessmen closely linked to the country's influential political authorities. In spite of this, the channel tried to distinguish apart from the public channels by modernising its news format, but without changing the content. In fact, it backs official media policy, but with modern tools.

The channel *Cham*, which now broadcasts from Cairo, avoids aggravating Egypt's already ambiguous relations with Damascus. Launched by a member of the Syrian National Assembly amidst near-official media coverage, *Cham* is experiencing financial difficulties and has chosen to base itself in Cairo to escape direct government control. But this emigration has not in any way given it an anti-

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<sup>22</sup> See [www.addounia.tv/index.php?p=192&id=1395](http://www.addounia.tv/index.php?p=192&id=1395).

establishment or critical identity. On the contrary, it reproduces the official discourse while adding a spiritual dimension with increased religious broadcasts.

*Al-Machriq*, launched in February 2009 by a Syrian businessman living in Dubai, tries hard to distinguish itself from its colleagues. It has developed a new language for the Syrian viewer by addressing his real everyday problems, without many taboos. Thus its cultural programmes look to set themselves apart from a cultural discourse long impoverished by the public channels. Intellectuals are beginning to see it as an asset, but there has been a less enthusiastic welcome from the authorities: the channel's Damascus offices were closed at the end of July 2009. Journalists and technicians were ordered to resign and to commit themselves to not collaborating with *al-Machriq* in the future. Explanations for the move range from those who consider this coercion to be politically motivated and those who see it merely as the business takeover of a profitable project by people close to the government.

In the public sector, there is a Ministry of Information project to launch a continuous news channel. Official sources believe it is important that the channel enjoys a wide margin of political manoeuvre, as concerns both the form and the content of its coverage, and that it will therefore have to accept a diversity of opinions on domestic affairs. This leaves a lot to be desired, given the previous experiments in the private sector. Even though the prevailing sentiment in political circles is that the official media are incompetent and lack credibility, these circles visibly lack the courage to admit that a media revolution and a relaxing of the restrictions on public expression are urgently required.

On the contrary, the way the public media work is persistently defended. The director of public television does not accept criticism and goes so far as to foreground freedom of expression in the public sector. She does not admit that the media in Syria do not enjoy freedom and even defies critics to find other official media that have the same degree of freedom as Syria's: "The official Syrian media are the strongest on the Arab scene. [...] Freedom of expression exists in Syria and is protected by law." But the same director adds: "We welcome critical people but reject vindictive people. By our definition, a critic is a citizen who has contradictory opinions to those of the government on a number of topics, his 'ceiling'<sup>23</sup> being the Motherland. On the other hand, anyone who accuses the government evidently believes that the patriotic citizen should insult and weaken the dignity of the nation and the people. In our view, that person is vindictive [...]"<sup>24</sup>

The editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper *Tichrîn* follows the same logic by exaggerating freedom of expression: "There is a difference between saying that Syrian media lack freedom of expression and saying that they are committed, with a nationalist Arab identity that they cannot neglect. [...] Syrian media are allowed to criticise all State authorities that can plausibly be criticised, on the condition that the criticism be well-argued, documented and objective".<sup>25</sup> In this climate, the Minister of Information banned the broadcasting of the August 2009 show of the public-television programme *Alâma fâriqa* (Distinguishing Mark), which hosted an eminent member of the Ba'ath Party.

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<sup>23</sup> I.e. his limits.

<sup>24</sup> *Al-Khalij*, 20 January 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Samîra Masalmé, [www.sadasoria.com](http://www.sadasoria.com), 23 September 2009.

And yet the official media restrictions are apparently insufficient, since it has been claimed that journalists are ranked by the Prime Minister in terms of their patriotism: “committed journalists loyal to the cause and interest of the nation; journalists who are only committed to furthering their own interests; and hostile journalists who give us no reason for hope”.<sup>26</sup> On 25 May 2009, the Prime Minister decided to force civil servants to deal only with the Syrian News Agency (SANA) and banned them from supplying information directly to the media.

The Ba’ath Party mouthpiece stigmatises Syrian correspondents working in the foreign media as follows: “they only know how to write to hurt people and twist meanings. [...] I notice that there has been a proliferation of bad news about us in the Arab press. [...] They are not interested in good news. [...] These journalists lack human dignity, national sentiment and patriotism”.<sup>27</sup>

The Syrian Internet was developed by Bashar al-Assad before he became President of Syria. It was approved by the government in 1996, though without allowing the general public direct access to the network. The growth of this sector has accelerated and the restrictions gradually been decreased, but the security services have not relinquished their monitoring of emails passing through Syrian servers. In 2003, private service providers entered the market. There followed an astute bit of footwork on the part of the authorities to control the flow of information. The tally of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression<sup>28</sup> stands at 49 Kurdish sites, 35 opposition sites, 32 social-networking sites, 31 general-media sites, 22 Lebanese sites, 16 Islamic sites, 15 human-rights sites, 14 proxy sites, 11 newspaper, radio and television sites, 9 cultural sites, 6 Iraqi sites, 1 Palestinian site – a total of 241 sites. In a situation where democracy struggles to establish itself, the Internet nonetheless manages to embody a technological way out for social, cultural and political issues.

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<sup>26</sup> *Al-Baath*, 30 August 2009.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 September 2009.

<sup>28</sup> See [www.openarab.net/ar/node/1398](http://www.openarab.net/ar/node/1398).



## Conclusion

In 2009 over 50 newspaper and magazine issues were suspended by the Minister of Information, without written trace, with all that this involves in terms of financial loss, loss of credibility and loss of regularity. Advertisers, fearful of irregular publication dates and government disapproval, are abandoning the “risky” private media. Individuals are sentenced to imprisonment for sharing their thoughts on the Internet or for publishing articles “that undermine national sentiment”. A substantial number of private publications closed after two or three issues, for want of financing, freedom and professionalism.

All the authorities engage in censorship, and even the organisation that distributes publications gives itself the right to delay or even block the circulation of a newspaper or magazine. However, this organisation, which has a monopoly on distribution, will see its power reduced two years from now after a decision was recently taken to deregulate the market gradually. Another obstacle which complicates the workings of the media was linked to the monopoly situation of the state advertising organisation. Without itself producing any adverts, it taxed media advertising revenue to the tune of 30–40%. This behaviour, which has been described as racketeering by the people concerned, further depleted the private media. But a revolutionary decision recently removed the organisation’s monopoly and deregulated the advertising sector.

Meanwhile efforts are continuing and those who dream of better days have not thrown in the towel. Being optimists, they believe in reason; and start initiatives to reach out to the decision-makers. In October 2005, for mostly commercial reasons, a private Syrian press consortium submitted a proposal to decision-makers entitled “The Syrian Media: Industry and Partnership”. To launch the debate on this subject, the group asked whether private media really existed in the country. If the answer is affirmative, will these media be able to play their part? After 40 years of shackled and biased public media, is it possible to develop private media? The consortium defined its requests as follows: tax exemption, like any other investment; and the development of a suitable legislative environment and partnership with the Ministry, but without being under its supervision. Appeals to the authorities to increase openness and reconsider the necessity for deregulating the public sphere are growing in number all the time. The response so far has been exclusively negative, but there is hope.



## 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.



## About the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia

The paper is produced in the framework of the Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia. This is a joint initiative by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam with the purpose of generating and integrating knowledge on the roles and opportunities for civil society actors in democratization processes in politically challenging environments. This programme integrates academic knowledge and practitioner's knowledge from around the world to develop new insights and strategies on how civil society actors in Syria and Iran can contribute to various processes of democratization and how international actors can support this.

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