

Syria: Threat to foreign media, bloggers, journalists

DAMASCAS, SYRIA: Authorities threaten foreign media, continue to arrest Syrian journalists and bloggers. The information ministry has threatened Arab and foreign media that are "illegally" in Syria, while Syrian journalists and bloggers continue to be arrested.



In a 9 March communiqué, the information ministry threatened to take measures against Arab and foreign journalists who have entered the country "illegally" and against anyone cooperating with them. The minister accused the foreign media of complicity with the "terrorists" and, by covering their activities" of "justifying their crimes." He also accused them of "fabricating" reports.

The minister reiterated the view that, if news media allow their reporters to enter Syria illegally, they are morally and legally responsible for what happens to them. This is similar to the position that the government took after the bombardment of the Media Centre in the Homs district of Baba Amr in which Rémi Ochlik and Marie Colvin were killed, Paul Conroy and Edith Bouvier were injured and two other journalists, William Daniels and Javier Espinosa were trapped.

The Syrian authorities have boasted of giving permission to 365 Arab and foreign media to enter the country since the start of the uprising in March 2011. Reporters Without Borders nonetheless receives reports every day of Syrian consulates refusing to issue visas to news media or freelance journalists. Moreover, those that receive permission are not necessarily able to work freely and independently, without [risking arrest](#) or [death](#).

In addition, while the minister openly threatens foreign reporters, Syrian journalists and bloggers continue to be arrested. In one of the latest incidents, Othman Matar, the father of the journalist Gheith Matar, was arrested on 8 March.

Twelve arrested

The 12 young people arrested on the evening of [7 March](#) in the restaurant Niniar, in the Damascus neighbourhood of Bab Sharqi, included Yara Michael Shamas, 20, an information technology specialist who is the daughter of a human rights lawyer active in Facebook, Jihad Jamal, a blogger known by the name of Milan, who [had been released on 29 December](#) after two and a half months in detention and Etan Labbad, a 20-year-old journalism student who has worked with various newspapers and websites such as *Kassioun* and *Baladna*.

[Reporters Without Borders reiterates its call](#) for the release of Mazen Darwish, the head of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression, and eight other people held since the 16 February raid on the centre - Hussein Gharir, Hani Zitani, Joan Fersso, Bassam Al-Ahmed, Mansour Al-Omari, Abdel Rahman Hamada, Ayham Ghazzoul and Shady Yazbek.

Syria is one of the countries on the ["Enemies of the Internet"](#) list that Reporters Without Borders released yesterday. The Media Centres created by the Local Coordination Committees in Syria were awarded the [2012 Netizen Prize](#). Syria is ranked 176th out of 179 countries in the [Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

Many journalists and netizens are meanwhile still detained without any information being available about their current status. This partial list was prepared with help from the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression:

- Said Dairky, an engineer employed by the national TV station who was arrested on 14 January.
- Alaa Shueiti, a cyber-activist arrested on 15 October in Homs.
- Mos'ab Massoud, a journalist with *Addounia*, who was arrested on 1 October after posting an article on *Elaph* headlined "The ministry of media and information and the question of sectarianism."
- Firas Fayyad, a filmmaker who was arrested on 1 December at Damascus airport as he was about to fly to Dubai.
- Bilal Ahmed Bilal, a *Falesteen* TV producer who was arrested in the Damascus suburb of Mo'adamieh on 13 September.
- Abdelmajid Rashed Al-Rahmoun, who was arrested on 23 August in Hama.
- Tarek Said Balsha, a photographer arrested in Latakia on 19 August. There has been no news of him since then.
- Mohamed Nihad Kurdiyya, a mechanical engineer who was arrested in Latakia on 18 August as he was about to be interviewed by *Al-Jazeera*.
- Abdelwalid Kharsah, a reporter who was arrested while covering demonstrations in Deraa on 17 August.
- Olwan Zouaiter, a journalist who has written for many Lebanese dailies. He was arrested by intelligence officials in the northern city of Raqqah on 16 March after returning from Libya. He was initially sentenced to five years in prison for allegedly contacting the Syrian opposition while abroad. The sentence was subsequently reduced to 13 months. He is serving it in Raqqah prison.

According to rumours circulating since 10 February, the detained writer and opposition activist Hussein Issou died in detention and his body was taken to the morgue of the military hospital in Damascus. A war of information or disinformation about his fate has been waged since then. Issou was originally arrested on [3 September](#) in the northeastern city of Al-Hassakah. Reporters Without Borders has urged the Syrian authorities to shed light on the status. His family does not know if he is alive or dead.

The status of these two persons is also of concern:

- Moheeb Al-Nawathy, a Palestinian journalist who had lived in Norway since 2007. He went missing on 5 January 2011, nine days after arriving in Damascus. He is a Fatah member and used to work for the website of the satellite TV station *Al-Arabiya*.
- Tal Al-Mallouhi, a 19-year-old student and blogger who has been detained since December 2009. She was brought before a state security court in Damascus for the second time on 17 January 2011. Reportedly accused of spying for the United States, she is being held in Duma prison, near Damascus. Internet users all over the world have been calling for her release.

Source: [Reporters Without Borders](#)