

Syria: Red lines that cannot be crossed

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The authorities don't want you to read or see too much

FOR "defaming and insulting the administrative bodies of the state", the president of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression, Mazen Darwish, was recently sentenced to a salutary ten days in jail. His real crime was to report on riots in an industrial town near Damascus, Syria's capital. Reporters Without Borders, a Paris-based lobby, said his case brought the number of journalists and "cyber dissidents" imprisoned in Syria to seven.

Mr Darwish may have got off lightly. In May Tareq Bayassi, aged 24, was jailed for three years for publishing "false news" on the internet after being detained without trial for almost a year. "The real reason for the sentence," says another lobby, the online Committee to Protect Bloggers, "was his having posted an article on the shortcomings of the Syrian secret service."

For several years Syria has been an enemy of the internet. The security services keep opposition figures and even ordinary bloggers under surveillance. The main internet service-provider bans 100-plus websites. Most sites carping at President Bashar Assad's government are silenced, as are many Kurdish and Islamist sites. A yellow screen flashes up with the words "Access Denied".

Even popular social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube were banned last year without explanation. They may be available at some of Syria's many internet cafés, but the secret services are scrutinising them ever more closely. Surfing aficionados still manage to get access to the sites by using proxy addresses, but this can be tediously slow.

The latest casualties include the Arabic version of the reference site Wikipedia and Israel's most liberal newspaper, Haaretz. "There's not much logic about it," said a Western telecoms engineer working in Syria, who had tried to reach the Logitech computer-hardware site without success. Hotmail has at times also been banned, though Yahoo! Mail has been untouched. The worldwide bookseller Amazon.com is blocked, yet "bizarrely" the company's British website is open. Meanwhile, Syria's government has signed a contract with a Chinese company to provide another 33,000 sought-after broadband lines.

Amid the confusion of what is banned or what is not, the cyber-sands often shift. A magazine in Damascus recently withdrew a story about the opposition and reprinted an altered issue after officials objected. "We thought it was quite favourable to the government as it was saying how weak and fragmented the opposition is," says the editor. "It just shows how the red lines move."

But in some areas there are signs of a tentative relaxation. The government has licensed several private radio stations, such as Mix FM, with its "Proud 2B Syrian" slogan. Amid an eclectic mix of Western rock, hip-hop and dance music, young, English-speaking presenters host live phone-ins of mostly idle chit-chat. Other talk shows have begun to tackle more delicate topics, such as the unpopular relocation of Damascus's main bus station. That, so far, is about as daring as you can get.

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