

Syrians find new friend in Beirut

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Facebook ban marks latest in series of restrictions that have driven dissidents to Lebanon.

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BEIRUT — To the outside world, Lebanon's constantly turbulent political scene can make the country seem like a dangerous place to visit. But to Syrians who have fallen out with the regime of President Bashar Assad, the tiny country next door is a democratic paradise.

With Mr. Assad's regime moving in recent months toward even tighter controls on free speech and dissent - this week it banned access to the popular Facebook social-networking website - a growing number of young Syrian dissidents have settled here in Lebanon, the only Arab country where they feel free to express their opinions and continue their political activism.

"It's a safe place for us as Syrians. All the other Arab countries are dictatorships," said 23-year-old Ahed al-Hindi as he sat on the terrace of a Starbucks coffee shop in Beirut's trendy Hamra neighbourhood.

Mr. al-Hindi knows that first-hand. He was arrested in a Damascus Internet café late last year after the café manager filmed him posting what Mr. al-Hindi says were "political comments on the human-rights situation" on a Syrian news website and reported him to the police.

He spent a month in prison for his online comments, and Mr. al-Hindi says the country's mukhabarat secret police continued to follow him after his release, repeatedly asking him to report on the people he met and foreigners he knew. At one point, they confronted him about a Danish woman he was dating, telling him they suspected she was working for Israel's spy agency, the Mossad.

"When I saw my life would be like this - that everything I did would be monitored - I decided to leave," he said.

Mr. al-Hindi fled first to neighbouring Jordan, then to Egypt, but said he didn't feel comfortable in either country, both of which mix a touch of democracy with a heavy dose of Syrian-style dictatorship. Finally, he travelled to Beirut, where he became friends with a group of other young Syrians who also came here to escape persecution at home.

Mohammed Abdullah, the son of a prominent dissident who was himself jailed six months last year after giving a news conference calling for his father's release from prison, believes he's in Beirut to stay. After being released from jail, the law student was initially banned from all travel, but was finally given a one-time pass to go to Lebanon, though only to collect his documents from the university where he studied before he was imprisoned.

Once he arrived in Lebanon, the 24-year-old decided there was no point in returning.

"I'll never go back. If I do, I'll have more problems with the government," Mr. Abdullah said. His father, Ali, has been jailed repeatedly for speaking out against the regime and his 22-year-old brother, Omar, has been in prison since early 2006 for publishing pro-democracy articles on the Internet.

"I miss my family and friends, but it's better to stay here. It's safer."

Mr. Abdullah served his jail time alongside both his father and brother - though he didn't see them through 52 days he was kept in solitary confinement in a windowless cell less than two square metres in size - as well as some of Mr. Assad's most prominent opponents, including journalist Michel Kilo and human-rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni.

Both Mr. Kilo and Mr. al-Bunni have been in jail since May, 2006, when they were among those who signed a document known as the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, which called for Syria - long accused of meddling in Lebanon - to normalize relations with its smaller neighbour.

Their arrests marked the beginning of a larger crackdown that signalled the end of brief hopes among the opposition that

Mr. Assad planned to reform the security state created by his father. Now, Mr. Abdullah said, the repression is widening.

The latest target - as evidenced by the arrests of Mr. al-Hindi and Omar Abdullah - is the Internet, where Syrian surfers frequently use the cover of anonymity or false names to criticize Mr. Assad and his regime. When Facebook was blocked to users in Syria on Monday, it joined popular sites such as YouTube and Blogspot, as well as a host of news websites, on the list of banned sites.

The ban, however, didn't look to be completely successful yesterday.

"Facebook is closed now in Syria but not on all connections [because] here in Syria we have a lot of ways to connect to the Internet and every way has its own proxy. So we still have the ability to access Facebook in other ways," wrote Eyad, a Syrian who defiantly posted on Facebook from inside the country yesterday. "The reason [the government did this], I really don't know."

Others were less diplomatic in their assessments of the Facebook ban and what it meant, in the process exercising the exact type of freedom of speech Mr. Assad's government is apparently afraid of.

"Democracy is being able to question why Bashar is doing this to his own countrymen and when [he is] not answering, he is out and someone else is in!" wrote one visitor who posted on the Syria network page of Facebook, noting that there was no government effort to block access to pornography sites. "I wanna fucking swear at Bashar from now till eternity and no one can stop me."

Clarification: Mohammed Abdullah and Ahed al-Hindi are not interested in joining a Beirut-based political movement that would fight for change in Syria. Information published Wednesday in The Globe and Mail may have left the wrong impression.

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