

Sudan

Sudan openly acknowledges filtering content that transgresses public morality and ethics or threatens order.¹ The state's regulatory authority has established a special unit to monitor and implement filtration; this primarily targets pornography and, to a lesser extent, gay and lesbian content, dating sites, and provocative attire.



Background

Since gaining independence from the UK in 1953, Sudan has been plagued by constant strife and civil war, which have stunted the development of both the economy and the government.² Previously an authoritarian state with all effective power vested in the president, Sudan is currently in a period of transition following the historic signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005.³ The CPA requires the sharing of power and wealth between the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the Government of Sudan.⁴ The CPA has prompted the drafting of an interim national constitution that affords basic rights, including freedom of religion and of the press, and that pro-

hibits human rights abuses, including torture and cruel punishment. In practice, however, violations of these provisions by the government and its security forces are numerous.⁵ Non-Muslims, non-Arab Muslims, and Muslims from sects unaffiliated with the ruling party face discriminatory policies and practices, as evidenced in the allocation of government jobs.⁶ Killings of civilians in conflict, abductions, life-threatening prison conditions, arbitrary arrests and detentions (of political opponents as well as journalists), and human trafficking (often for sexual exploitation, forced labor, or military conscription) constitute additional human rights violations.⁷

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political	●				
Social					●
Conflict/security	●				
Internet tools				●	

Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable
Transparency			●	
Consistency			●	

KEY INDICATORS

Source (by indicator): World Bank 2005, 2006a, 2006a; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2005

Violence and human rights abuses continue in the Darfur region of western Sudan, in a conflict that has spread across the Chad border. In February 2007, the government of Sudan denied the U.N. Human Rights Council visas to enter Darfur to conduct an impartial review.⁸ U.N. officials say that conflict in the region has resulted in over 400,000 deaths and displaced approximately two million people.⁹

Internet in Sudan

Internet usage in Sudan is limited. Where infrastructure does exist, access can be prohibitively expensive. There are few locally produced Web pages.¹⁰

The infrastructure in Sudan is not optimized for high-speed data communications services, and both the capability and reliability of domestic data networks need improvement. Fifteen Internet service providers (ISPs) operate in Sudan (2006), but only two have direct connectivity to the global Internet; the rest are considered by the Sudanese government to be operating illegally.¹¹

The number of home Internet subscriptions increased by a factor of ten between 2001 and 2005, rising from 50,000 to 500,000. During the

same period, the number of Internet cafés more than doubled. However, Internet usage remains concentrated in Khartoum, accounting for 95 percent of Internet users. The majority of Internet users in Sudan rely on dialup connections (59 percent), and very few have high-speed Internet (19 percent). While 81 percent of universities in Sudan are Internet-equipped, most (65 percent) still use dialup connections.

The information and telecommunications sector in Sudan is regulated by the National Telecommunication Corporation (NTC). In 1993, the state-owned Public Telecommunication Corporation was transformed into the Sudan Telecommunication Company (Sudatel), allowing private investors to purchase a share in the enterprise. However, two-thirds of the shares of the company remained in government hands while it assumed exclusive operational control of the sector.¹²

In 2001, the Sudanese government adopted the National Strategy for Building the Information Industry, with the goal of enabling “all sectors of society to access information media in a way leading to the widest dissemination and utilization of information, all of which shall contribute to achieve an appreciated economic growth, wealth

development, job opportunities, enhancement of all-sector production rates and eradication of poverty.”¹³ As a result of the Strategy, Sudatel’s monopoly over mobile telephony ended in 2002 and competitive operators—including several ISPs—in telecommunications were licensed.¹⁴

Legal and regulatory frameworks

Article 39 of the 2005 interim national constitution of the Republic of Sudan states that “[e]very citizen shall have an unrestricted right to the freedoms of expression, reception and dissemination of information, publication, and access to the press without prejudice to order, safety or public morals as determined by law.”¹⁵ The same article also states that the “state shall guarantee the freedom of the press and other media as shall be regulated by law in a democratic society.”¹⁶ However, in practice, these rights have been severely restricted.¹⁷ Since emergency laws (which had provided for official censorship) were lifted on July 9th, 2005, the government has continued to censor print media.¹⁸ In 2006, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) voiced alarm over “increasing censorship of opposition and independent newspapers in Sudan.”¹⁹ Additionally, fear of reprisals has led to self-censorship among journalists.²⁰

The 2001 National Strategy for Building the Information Industry called for filtering Internet content that is “morally offensive and in violation of public ethics and order, [and] that may promote corruption and deface traditional identity.”²¹ The NTC declares that, although it targets several categories, “[t]he most important is the pornographic material, which accounts for over 95 percent of the total volume of the censored materials. Other categories include pages related to narcotics, explosives, alcohols, sacrilege, blasphemy, and gambling.”²² Interestingly, the NTC uses Western peer-reviewed research to support its decision to block these materials in defense of the public good. The NTC states that “[t]here is no political site among the list of blocked sites,”

and admits that “some translation sites were blocked as they were used to circumvent filtering.”²³

The NTC has set up a special filtering unit to screen Internet media before it reaches users in Sudan. The NTC asserts that sites are filtered based on their contents rather than their names, and that filtering is needed “to preserve noble values and . . . safeguard the society against evil.”²⁴ According to the NTC, the Internet Service Control Unit receives daily requests to add Web sites to, or remove them from, the blacklist. The NTC makes available on its Web site an e-mail address for such requests.²⁵

ONI testing results

Testing was conducted on two ISPs in Sudan, Sudanet and Zina Net. Their blocking behavior was identical.

Pornography was extensively filtered. However, some online discussion groups that facilitate the exchange of Arabic sex materials were found to be accessible. There was also some blocking of gay and lesbian, dating, and provocative-attire Web sites. Those dating Web sites that were blocked were those likely to host sexually explicit (for example, www.adultfriendfinder.com) or gay and lesbian (www.gayromeo.com) content. Other blocked gay and lesbian Web sites included a site addressing domestic violence (www.lesbians-against-violence.com) and a search portal (www.bglad.com), which were filtered due to being miscategorized as pornography by the commercial software Smart Filter.

Also blocked were health-related sites pertaining to the alteration of body parts, such as www.circumcision.org and www.breastenlargementmagazine.com. Similarly, most of the miscellaneous sites blocked—such as www.collegehumor.com, www.metacafe.com, and www.bootyologist.com—probably contain sexually explicit content.

Access to the feminist Web site www.feminista.com was blocked.

Many of the tested sites that facilitate anonymous Web surfing or circumvention of Internet filters were blocked. Additionally, some Web sites with hacking, cracking, or WAREZ content were blocked.

A small number of translation Web sites—which the NTC argues are used to circumvent filtering²⁶—were blocked.

Only one tested blog, Boingboing, was blocked. This may have been an unintentional artifact of Smart Filter, which categorizes Boingboing as a pornographic Web site.²⁷ Still, blogging is subject to scrutiny and can incur serious consequences. In October 2006, Sudan expelled Jan Pronk, a top U.N. official, from the country after he posted in his blog (www.jan-pronk.nl) sensitive statements relating to the conflict in Darfur.²⁸ ONI has monitored and verified the blog's accessibility from Sudan.

Some Web sites discussing Christianity or criticizing Islam, such as www.islamreview.com, were blocked.

The Arab Network for Human Rights Information (www.hrinfo.org) reported that the NTC blocked access to the Web site www.sudaneseonline.com in 2004.²⁹ This site was not found to be blocked during ONI testing.

Conclusion

Online pornography is extensively blocked in Sudan, as the government openly acknowledges. Many anonymizer and proxy Web sites are blocked, as are some sites related to provocative attire, dating, and gay and lesbian interests. Sudan is relatively transparent in its filtering of the Internet compared with other Arab states, and even provides an appellate process for challenging the blocking of a site.

NOTES

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Syria

In addition to filtering a range of Web content, the Syrian government monitors Internet use closely and has detained citizens “for expressing their opinions or reporting information online.”¹ Vague and broadly worded laws invite government abuse and have prompted Internet users to engage in self-censoring and self-monitoring to avoid the state’s ambiguous grounds for arrest.²



Background

Syria is among the most repressive countries in the world with regard to freedom of expression and information. Criticisms of the president and reports on the problems of religious and ethnic minorities in Syria remain particularly sensitive topics.³ Human rights organizations have reported exhaustively on political arrests and detentions.⁴

In 2006 Reporters Without Borders ranked Syria among the thirteen “enemies of the Internet.”⁵ Although the government does recognize the importance of the Internet as a source of economic growth, it also admits to automatically blocking pornographic Web sites⁶ and to censor-

ing “pro-Israel and hyper-Islamist” Web sites, such as “those run by the illegal Muslim Brotherhood, and those calling for autonomy for Syrian Kurds.”⁷ In defense of these practices, Minister of Technology and Communications Amr Salem said, “Syria is currently under attack ... and if somebody writes, or publishes or whatever, something that supports the attack, they will be tried.”⁸

Internet in Syria

With a literacy rate of 80 percent,⁹ Syria’s main barriers to Internet access are economic. Only 4.2 percent of the population own personal computers, with just 1 percent of Syrians

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political					●
Social			●		
Conflict/security			●		
Internet tools				●	

Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable
Transparency		●		
Consistency			●	

KEY INDICATORS

Source (by indicator): World Bank 2005, 2006a, 2006a; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2005

subscribing to Internet services.¹⁰ The proliferation of Internet cafés¹¹ has helped raise the Internet penetration rate to approximately 6 percent,¹² but many Syrians still find the cost of these cafés prohibitive.¹³

In recent years, the government has endeavored to expand Internet access by installing hardware and telecommunications capabilities in schools, by subsidizing the cost of personal computers, and, most recently, by fostering competition among Internet service providers (ISPs).¹⁴

There are four ISPs that are neither owned nor funded by the government. Still, the two government-affiliated ISPs,¹⁵ Syria Telecommunication Establishment (STE) and SCS-net (now Aolola), continue to occupy the majority of the market.¹⁶ Aya, one of the privately owned ISPs, has close ties to the government.¹⁷

Legal and regulatory frameworks

In addition to maintaining regulatory control over ISPs, the Syrian government imposes financial and technical constraints on Internet users. Syrian Internet subscribers wishing to use ports other than port 80—the port most often used for Web browsing—must apply for a special service

and pay a small monthly fee.¹⁸ Aya and other ISPs offer plans that allow users to access the Internet with a fixed IP address, which is necessary to host sites, to use Virtual Private Networks, and to bypass the ISP's proxy server. They may also pay for a special plan that allows them to open otherwise blocked ports, such as those used for Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and video chat.¹⁹

Points of Internet access are also strictly regulated and sometimes monitored. To open an Internet café an owner must obtain a license from the Telecommunications Department's office in the local governorate. To acquire a license, the owner must follow the regulations in the Conditions Manual, which include specifications on the spacing between computers.²⁰ Though users at Internet cafés are not required to show ID or give their names, some Syrians have reported that plainclothes officials watch Internet cafés and take note of the users.²¹

The Constitution of the Arab Republic of Syria affords every citizen “the right to freely and openly express his views in words, in writing, and through all other means of expression,” while also guaranteeing “the freedom of the press, of printing, and publication in accordance with the

law.²² In actuality, these freedoms are limited by other legislative provisions. Article 4(b) of the 1963 Emergency Law authorizes the government to monitor all publications and communications.²³ That law also allows the government to arrest those who commit “crimes which constitute an overall hazard” or other vaguely defined offenses.²⁴

The Press Law of 2001 subjects all print media—from newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals to books, pamphlets, and posters—to government control and censorship.²⁵ Printing “falsehoods” or “fabricated reports” is a criminal offense under the Press Law, and writing on topics relevant to “national security [or] national unity” is forbidden.²⁶ Violators may be penalized with hefty monetary fines, lengthy prison terms, or license suspensions or revocations.²⁷ Furthermore, “periodicals that are not licensed as political publications [are prohibited] from publishing ‘political’ articles”—a provision that “amounts to blanket government censorship.”²⁸ Thus, although the Internet has facilitated access to unofficial information, that information is limited by the controls and threats codified in Syrian law.

The government has demonstrated its willingness to punish Syrians for writing and transmitting information online.²⁹ Authorities have detained individuals for e-mailing an image or article produced by another party, for voicing complaints about the government, and for posting original photographs of police crackdowns on the Web.³⁰ These incidents have engendered caution and self-censorship across the Syrian Internet as a whole and within the Syrian blogosphere, which nonetheless continues to grow and to become more vibrant.³¹

ONI testing results

Testing was conducted on one of the main ISPs in Syria, Aoolaa (formally SCS-Net). Although the tests indicate that Syria now blocks fewer Web

sites than it has in the past, many sites remain blocked.

The Web site of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, www.jimsyr.com, was blocked, though the Web site of the Egyptian branch, the region’s largest, was available. Two Kurdish Web sites, www.tirej.net and www.amude.net, were blocked, as was the Web site of the United States Committee for a Free Lebanon (www.freelebanon.org), which campaigns for an end to Syrian influence in Lebanese politics. The Arabic- and English-language sites of the unrecognized Reform Party of Syria were filtered, along with the Web sites of the *Hizb al-Tahrir* (Liberation Party)—an Islamist group that seeks to restore the Caliphate and that remains banned in many countries.

ONI’s tests found that 115 Syrian blogs hosted on Google’s popular blogging engine, www.blogspot.com, were blocked, strongly suggesting that the ISP had blocked access to all blogs hosted on this service, including many apolitical blogs. www.freesyria.wordpress.com, a blog created to campaign for the release of Michel Kilo, a prominent Syrian journalist imprisoned for his writings, was also blocked.

In the past, Syria has reportedly filtered access to popular e-mail sites. ONI testing found www.hotmail.com to be blocked, along with two, relatively small Web-based e-mail sites, www.address.com and www.netaddress.com. None of the Arabic-language e-mail sites ONI tested were blocked, though the Arabic-language hosting site www.khayma.com was.

Nearly one-third of the anonymizer sites tested were blocked, indicating some measure of effort to preempt circumvention.

Though most foreign news sites were accessible, Web sites of some important Arabic newspapers and news portals were found to be blocked. Examples include the pan Arab, London-based, Arabic-language newspapers, *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (www.al-quds.co.uk) and *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, (www.asharqalawsat.com), the

news portal www.elaph.com, the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al Seyassah* (www.alseyassah.com), the U.S.-based Web site of the *Arab Times* (www.arabtimes.com), and the Islamically oriented news and information portal www.islamonline.net. These publications frequently run articles critical of the Syrian government.

Web sites of human rights organizations were generally available. Sites associated with the London-based Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) marked an important exception; all URLs on the www.shrc.org.uk domain were found blocked in this round of testing. As indicated above, some blogs that criticize the human rights record of Syria were also blocked.

Only three Web sites of the Web sites tested with pornographic content were blocked: www.playboy.com, www.sex.com, and www.netarabic.com/vb (this last is a message board with pornographic content).

Web sites that focus on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered issues were generally available. One site, www.gaywired.com, was an exception.

Unfortunately, an insufficient number of Israeli Web sites were tested to confirm whether or not Syria blocks the entire “.il” domain, as past reports have suggested.³² However, the fact that the Institute for Counter Terrorism’s Israeli Web site (www.ict.org.il) was blocked—while the Institute’s alternate URL (www.instituteforcounterterrorism.org), lacking the “.il” suffix, was not—lends credence to such reports. Furthermore, the Web site for the World Zionist organization (www.wzo.org.il) was blocked.

Conclusion

The Web sites blocked in Syria span a range of categories, with the most substantial filtering occurring among sites that criticize government policies and actions or espouse oppositional political views. Repressive legislation and the imprisonment of journalists and online writers for their activities online have led many Syrians to

engage in self-censorship. Meanwhile, the government continues to promote the growth of the Internet throughout the country.

NOTES

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