

## The Syrian Regime's Law No. 19 of 2024 on Establishing a Media Ministry Blatantly Violates Freedom of Media, Opinion, and Expression



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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyzes in Syria.

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## I. Brief Overview of the Syrian Regime's Dominant Control Over the Media

Syria is notoriously one of the lowest-ranking countries globally on many human rights indexes; chief among these is freedom of press and media work. The Syrian regime bears full responsibility for the abysmal state to which the country's media have sunk. Since 2011, the Syrian regime has constantly committed an ever-increasing range of violations against journalists and media workers. The regime still maintains a complete ban on all independent media outlets; including domestic, regional, and international ones, while imposing full and absolute control over every element of state media, and quashing any freedom of opinion and expression for media workers and citizens through restrictive laws and decrees that explicitly violate international human rights law, and alarmingly limit the freedom of the press, opinion, and expression.

One sign of the gravity of the situation is Syria's status as the second-lowest ranked country on the [Reporters Without Borders' \(RSF\) 2024 World Press Freedom Index](#), which was released on Friday, May 3, 2024, with Syria ranking 179th out of 180 countries worldwide, in what has been a steady decline, following the state's 175th ranking on the 2023 World Press Freedom Index, and its 171st ranking on the 2022 World Press Freedom Index.

Syria has not enjoyed any form of genuine press and media freedom ever since the Arab Socialist Baath Party seized power in the country in 1963. From the start, the Baath Party banned all independent journalists, only maintaining those newspapers that were effectively party mouthpieces.<sup>1</sup> The situation only grew worse after Hafez Assad ascended to power in 1971, following the 1970 coup,<sup>2</sup> and then as his son Bashar Assad was named president in 2000. Both the Assad father and the son sought to further consolidate their iron grip on every aspect of life in Syria, especially the media,<sup>3</sup> which was turned into an instrument of control, indoctrination, and distortion, as dissenting voices were suppressed and freedom of expression denied.

1. Military Order No. 4 of 1963 discontinued the publication of all newspapers in the country, save for a few (al-Wehda al-Arabiya, Barada, and al-Baath), and dictated that any new newspaper must first obtain a permit from the Ministry of Media. This was followed by Legislative Order No. 4 on March 13, 1963, which revoked the license of all periodic newspapers and publications and provided for shutting down their printing places. A month later, on April 29, 1963, Decision No. 154 was issued, banning a wide range of journalists from working.
2. Legislative Decree No. 42 of 1975 on the Establishment of the Public Institution for the Distribution of Printed Media gave the regime complete control over the media distribution process in the private sector. According to this decree, print newspaper owners were forbidden from independently distributing their newspapers or contracting any other party for distribution except the regime-controlled Public Institution for the Distribution of Printed Media, imposing criminal and financial fines on any institution failing to comply with this decree. The Public Institution for the Distribution of Printed Media enjoyed a monopoly over the distribution of all printed media in Syria and abroad, as well as having the sole right to distribute foreign-published media in Syria, not to mention being granted total censorship powers, and even the ability to determine the number of copies of any certain publication that could be distributed. The Public Institution also had the power to issue licenses to sell printed media, to decide where and how many copies any outlet might sell, and so on.
3. The Law on Printed Media promulgated through Legislative Decree No. 50 of 2011 in itself served as a fully-realized system of strict and restrictive regulations on freedom of press and expression that included all newspapers, magazines, and other periodic publications, or in short, any and all printed materials in Syria and abroad, ranging from books to pamphlets, posters, and bulletins. The articles of this legislative decree applies to publishers, editors, journalists, authors, owners of publishing houses, and distributors, and prescribe imprisonment punishments and heavy fines on anyone violating its articles.

The Syrian regime further compounded its suppression of journalists and media workers following the start of the popular uprising for democracy in Syria in 2011. Hundreds of journalists and media workers have been killed, arrested, and forcibly disappeared since then, while all regional and international media outlets operating in Syria at the time were banned and expelled, except for those that unquestioningly embraced the regime's narrative.

Moreover, the Syrian regime maintained its absolute hegemony over every area of legislative power in Syria, with the regime effectively using this limitless power to legalize and rationalize a wide range of violations through promulgating quasi-legal laws. In this, the Syrian regime allowed the executive branch/security apparatus to have full control over the People's Assembly of Syria, both in terms of its composition (at least 56 current members of the [People's Assembly of Syria](#) have been involved in gross human rights violations that constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes), and the laws passed by it. Naturally, this allowed the regime to adopt whatever laws serve its interests, regardless of the fact that these may violate international human rights law and the interests of the Syrian people.

To the Syrian regime, ensuring total control of the media has been a paramount issue from the very first moments of the popular uprising, which is why the regime worked to ensure its absolute power over all aspects of the media sector by promulgating several decrees and laws from 2011 onwards, starting with the Law on Media, which was adopted through [Legislative Decree No. 108 of 2011](#), and then [Legislative Decree No. 107 of 2012](#) on the Implementation of the Articles of the Law on Online Communication and Combating Cybercrime. There was also [Legislative Decree No. 23 of 2016](#), which was an amendment to the Law on Media, and then [Law No. 20 of 2022](#), which can be described as an overhaul of the existing criminal articles on cybercrime; this was followed by Law No. 19 of 2024, the subject of focus of this report, which was one of a series of laws with the sole objective of consolidating control over the various aspects and sectors of media, increasing censorship, silencing dissenting views, and further tightening the security apparatus's already stifling grip on the media through the power of the law in a blatant violation of international human rights law.

In this report examining the most notable articles in Law No. 19 of 2024, recently promulgated by the Syrian regime, we analyze the most important articles, highlighting how these overlap with other laws promulgated by the regime with the aim of controlling the media. This report adopts an approach based on legal reasoning to detect and shed light on the legal violations committed by the Syrian regime in this sphere. The report also draws upon the figures and information found on the database of the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), which we have been updating and maintaining since 2011.

This report forms part of SNHR's efforts to analyze and evaluate the items of legislation adopted by the regime from an official, objective standpoint. To that end, we try to highlight the flaws, gaps, and breaches found in these articles of legislation vis-à-vis the Syrian constitution, domestic laws, international human rights law, and customary international law.

## II. Law No. 19 of 2024 Further Consolidates the Regime's Iron Grip on the Media

On April 23, 2024, the Syrian regime promulgated [Law No. 19 of 2024](#), which introduces a new Ministry of Media, to supplant the older ministry of the same name, which was established in accordance with Legislative Decree No. 186 of 1961, with the same rights and responsibilities. The new ministry has been granted far-reaching powers to control all aspects of Syria's media sector (following the disbandment of the National Council for Media in accordance with Legislative [Decree No. 23 of 2016](#)), including drama production, digital media, and social media.

The new law contained conflicting articles, some of which respect human rights standards, such as Article 3, while many others violate human right principles. Such contradictions seem to be a norm followed by the Syrian regime in many of the laws it promulgates, even the constitution itself.

SNHR has concluded that the text of Law No. 19 of 2024 simply perpetuates the policies already established by the regime to restrict freedom of opinion and expression and further consolidate the regime's own draconian control over media outlets, which will now be exercised through the newly founded ministry.

While states worldwide strive tirelessly to respect and adhere to the principle of media freedom and adopt a hands-off approach by dissolving ministries of media or limiting the mandates of any such ministries that still exist, assiduously avoiding imposing restrictions, dictating content, or censoring content, the Syrian regime has gone the opposite way. In that, the newly founded Ministry of Media will control the work of journalists, control content, and form committees to censor private journalism and printed publications that enter the country, while also restricting drama production.

According to Article 4 of Law 19/2024, which outlines the functions of the newly founded ministry, the Ministry of Media shall supervise and control everything associated with journalistic and media work, meaning having absolute and complete control through which the regime can completely dictate media content, no matter the form, in Syria. This new authority is seen in every stage of media production, starting with establishing regulations for the media sector, to investing in accordance with the applicable laws; communicating with foreign media to relay the new policies of the Syrian Arab Republic with a positive spin to influence global public opinion; coordinating, with international organizations to train media staff; conducting research, studies, and polls; supervising the process of producing advertisements and distributing printed media, evaluating drama content and regulating the drama industry; approving and regulating the work of foreign correspondents; monitoring and controlling the activities of foreign media working in Syria, establishing a monopoly over the representation of Syrian TV production and Syrian media abroad; and licensing publishing houses and media service companies.

Even more repressively, Articles 8 and 9 regulate the drama industry through establishing a body called the National Committee on Drama, which would be responsible for framing the policies for production, scripting, and distribution. Furthermore, Article 12 strips some existing institutions of their powers. For instance, the Journalists Union<sup>4</sup> can no longer issue IDs for media workers or assist them with obtaining other documents, with these powers now the sole prerogative of the media ministry.

It is clear that Law No. 19 of 2024 is intended to serve as a prelude to announcing the New Law on Media, which has been in the works for years, and is currently under discussion at the People's Assembly of Syria ahead of its eventual promulgation. Even though this law has not yet been publicized, a leaked draft copy has emerged. As expected, the law perpetuates the regime's policy of restricting journalistic and media work, raising criticism from a number of journalists and other media workers in Syrian media. According to pro-regime newspapers, the head of the Journalists Union himself has expressed his displeasure with the draft law, saying: "The new project does not meet aspirations at all. It greatly drags back the legislative framework for practicing the profession of media in Syria."

It is also worth noting that Law No. 19 of 2024 clearly contradicts Article 42 of the Syrian Constitution of 2012, which states, "Every citizen shall have the right to freely and openly express his views whether in writing or orally or by all other means of expression." Similarly, Article 43 states: "The state shall guarantee freedom of the press, printing and publishing, the media and its independence in accordance with the law."<sup>5</sup>

From another standpoint, we believe that Law No. 19 also paves the way for the privatization of the media sector, in a way that facilitates further encroachment by Iran into this sector through influential, Iranian regime-aligned businessmen. On April 30, 2024, one week after Law 19/2024 had been passed, the Syrian Council of Ministers gave preliminary approval to a proposal by the [Ministry of Media](#) to establish a joint-stock company under the name the Syrian Company for Media with the publicized aim of "developing media work, promoting the national media's competitive capabilities, launching TV channels, and providing digital broadcast services."

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4. Since 1970, the Syrian regime has tried to exert absolute control over professional and scientific unions. On April 7, 1980, a decree was issued in response to strike action by the unions, authorizing the Council of Ministers to dissolve trade unions, which came into effect on April 10, 1980, through a decision passed by the government. As such, those unions representing lawyers, doctors, dentists, pharmacists, and engineers were all dissolved, with their members arrested. Subsequently, the unions were supplanted by new bodies subservient to the ruling authority and closely linked to the regime's security apparatus, as well as aligned with the Baath Party, including the journalists union, which was repurposed, through Law No. 1 of 1990 on the Journalists Union, as a body that carries out administrative, regulatory, and mobilization functions as instructed by the Baath Party and the security apparatus. This can be seen in Article 3 of Law 1/1990 which describes the Journalists Union as a "professional union body that believes in the goals of the Arabic Nation: that is of unity, liberty, and socialism, and works to achieve said goals in line with the dictation and instruction of the Arab Socialist Baath Party".

5. Translations taken from:

Constitute Project. Syrian Arab Republic 2012. [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Syria\\_2012](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Syria_2012)

The decision to found this company is also in accordance with [Law No. 3 on Introducing, Governing, and Managing Public Joint Stock & Joint Companies](#), which was promulgated on February 14, 2024. That law provides for establishing joint companies (companies in which the state owns at least 50 percent of their capital) but fails to specify the nature of the other partner(s) and whether or not these can be legal persons, nor does it specify the nature of the sectors included under this law. This way, the law can serve as a prelude to the privatization of the state's private assets, and can give the state a window to ensure control of all aspects of the state through external individuals who have large equities in those companies. Similarly, this creates a window for more Iranian encroachment into the Syrian economy, including the media, through a clique of pro-Iranian regime businessmen.

### **III. Law No. 19 of 2024 is One of a Series of Laws riminalizing Freedom of Opinion and Expression; Most Blatantly Among These is Law No. 20 of 2022 on Cybercrime**

Law No. 19 of 2024 is one in a series of decrees and laws passed by the regime in order to restrict the freedom of press, opinion, and expression, by wielding complete and absolute control over state media, with a complete ban on independent media outlets, and imposing stricter punishments with relation to journalistic and media work. The most recent of those laws; which restrict freedom of press, opinion, and expression; was Law No. 20 of 2022 on Cybercrime, which was promulgated by the head of the Syrian regime Bashar Assad on April 18, 2022. The law, which served as an overhaul of the criminal rules on cybercrime as established in Legislative Decree No. 17 of 2012, contains vaguely defined articles that violate the right to freedom of press, opinion, and expression, and threaten digital rights and online privacy. The law comprises 50 articles that prescribe stricter punishments in relation to publishing content online that could be deemed transgressive or dissident by the authorities. For instance, the law prescribes a double punishment of a fine and imprisonment term against anyone who publishes content online with the aim of “toppling or changing the ruling regime in the state”, or which “would undermine the image of the state or national unity.” As can be seen, these are exceptionally vague, broad charges that can be leveled by the security forces and the police against anyone detained over their activities in cyberspace.

SNHR has released [a report](#), in which it stressed that the texts of Law No. 20 of 2022 perpetuate the regime's policy of restricting freedom of opinion and expression, and expands the scope of the already-broad charges phrased and used by the regime as a pretext since March 2011 to legalize the widespread arrests and gives its security apparatus open-ended powers.

As SNHR's database attest, 176 individuals, including 21 women, have been arrested in connection with the Cybercrime Law since it was promulgated on April 18, 2022, up until May 2024. Among those arrested were journalists, citizen journalists, and media workers.

Besides the wide-reaching arm of the four security apparatuses themselves, each of those four apparatuses has a special branch<sup>6</sup> that monitors local and international media, whether audio or video, or written, and social media. As such, civilians, media workers, government employees, and famous content-makers in regime-held areas are called in for questioning over their critique of the living conditions or the work of the state institutions. In most cases, those brought in are subjected to torture, and usually they are not referred to the judiciary, as they become forcibly disappeared persons. Otherwise, they may be released after threatening them or forcing them to stop their activities on social media, or to never speak about public issues, whether positively or negatively. In case they are referred to the judiciary, they are usually referred to the exceptional courts such as the Counterterrorism Court, where they face multiple charges on the grounds of the Cybercrime Law, Counterterrorism Law,<sup>7</sup> or the Syrian Penal Code.

Articles 285, 286, 287, and 291 of the [Syrian Penal Code](#) prescribe an imprisonment term of five years against anyone who, in times of war or in anticipation of a war, publishes rhetoric that aims to "weaken national sentiment" or transmits exaggerated news in Syria that would "weaken the psyche of the nation", or anyone responsible for acts of aggression that aim to change the constitution of the state through unlawful means. Also, a minimum of six-month imprisonment is prescribed against anyone who transmits exaggerated news abroad that would undermine the "image of the state or its financial stature."

Meanwhile, Articles 148, 149, and 150 of the [Military Penal Code](#) state that timed detention shall be sentenced against anyone who publishes an article or gives a political speech for the purpose of promoting or advertising a party, association, organization, body, or political group, or anyone who calls for changing the constitution through unlawful means.

Moreover, [Article 8 of Law No. 19 of 2012](#) (Counterterrorism Law) states that "Anyone who distributes publications or stored information, no matter the form, with the aim of promoting means of terrorism or acts of terrorism shall be sentenced to timed hard labor. The same punishment applies to anyone who manages or uses a website for this purpose."

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6. Those are the General Intelligence Directorate's Information Branch (Branch No. 255), the Military Security Intelligence Directorate's Information Branch, the Air Force Intelligence Directorate's Information Branch, and the Political Security Intelligence Directorate's Information Branch.

7. Article 8 of Law No. 19 of 2012 (Counterterrorism Law) states that "Anyone who distributes publications or stored information, no matter the form, with the aim of promoting means of terrorism or acts of terrorism shall be sentenced to timed hard labor. The same punishment applies to anyone who manages or uses a website for this purpose."



## IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

### Conclusions

1. SNHR stresses that the text of Law No. 19 of 2024 perpetuates the regime's policy of restricting freedom of opinion and expression, and consolidating control over media outlets, in a broader attempt to monopolize and restrict information, and spread misinformation in service of its interests, no matter how much this goes against the interests of the state and the Syrian people.
2. This law is one of a series of laws and decrees promulgated by the regime to consolidate control over the media, in particular social media which is a source of anxiety for the regime due to its ubiquitous use and close reflection of the popular sentiment, as well as to the difficulty in controlling it. Moreover, it is hard to continue the same level of indoctrination with the spread of social media, unlike traditional media outlets that have a clear hierarchy, structure, and bodies.
3. The Syrian regime has used those laws primarily as instruments to criminalize and persecute a wide range of civilians, including even pro-regime figures, for practicing the most basic forms of expression of opinion or voicing criticism against the authority, especially in light of the rising levels of popular resentment in regime-controlled areas amid steadily deteriorating economic and living conditions for civilians.

### Recommendations

#### UN and international community

- Condemn the Syrian regime's hegemony over the three branches of power, and expose its practices in promulgating laws that restrict freedom of opinion and expression.
- Apply as much pressure as possible on the regime to repeal all legislation that violates international law and is used to restrict and criminalize freedom of opinion and expression.
- Condemn the Syrian regime's practices, as well as those carried out by the other parties to the conflict, against journalists, and support journalistic institutions working in Syria, so they can freely report events and developments.
- Make serious and effective efforts to ensure the safety of journalists and media workers in Syria and end impunity for violations against them, as stated in Security Council resolution 2222 (2015), and Human Rights Council resolution 33/2, adopted on September 29, 2016, and the UN General Assembly resolution 162/70, adopted on December 17, 2015, as well as in the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity adopted in 2019.

### **Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)**

- Condemn violations of freedom of opinion and expression, and against journalists and media workers in Syria, and shed more light on their sacrifices and suffering.
- Condemn the laws that violate human rights, particularly those violating freedom of opinion and expression.
- Call for the disclosure of the fate of journalists, media workers, and forcibly disappeared persons.

### **Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI)**

- Document the extent to which the laws promulgated by the Syrian regime violate international human rights law, particularly freedom of opinion and expression, and condemn all arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance practices carried out on the grounds of said laws.

### **Syrian regime**

- Cease the subjugation of the People's Assembly of Syria and stop using it to pass laws that violate the constitution and international human rights law with respect to freedom of opinion and expression.
- Repeal all arbitrary laws promulgated to date that violate human rights and deny and restrict freedom of opinion and expression. In a statement released on April 5, 2024, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) urged "the [Syrian] government to remove all articles of the media law, and other legislation, that criminalize media professionals' work."
- Immediately release journalists and media workers who have been arbitrarily arrested, and disclose the fate of those who have been forcibly disappeared.
- Allow all media outlets to enter the country, and stop imposing control over the work of journalists.



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*No justice without accountability*

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