

# Syria's relaxation of internet controls – has it made any difference? (guest blog)

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*In February, as uprisings swept the Middle East, Syria, the 'enemy of the Internet', lifted a five-year ban on some select social media websites – among them Facebook, YouTube and Blogspot. What difference has it made? Journalist Amanda Nunn, who lived in Syria until recently, reports on what her contacts there tell her.*

Syria recently gained the unpalatable title of being the most restrictive Middle Eastern country for internet censorship, formally held by Tunisia. Syria blocked (and still blocks) a number of sites ranging from pornography to Kurdish websites. These restrictions however are not uniform and inconsistencies such as blocking Hotmail but not YahooMail are not uncommon.



More or less every internet cafe I visited (albeit these were in the more touristy areas) already had the settings changed so that a proxy computer, usually in Saudi Arabia, was used so the public were free to browse banned sites at their leisure. There were even computer programmes that people would pass around to find a new proxy number should one stop working. Sometimes I had to ask for the proxy to be put in which the staff would do without a bat of the eye.

I was speaking about the use of Facebook with my Syrian Arabic teacher who now lives in East London. She told me that during the last year the majority of her family have opened Facebook accounts long before the ban was lifted. Furthermore Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's wife had a Facebook profile with over a thousand 'friends' while the ban was still in place. Bashar has one as well but it's difficult to tell if this is administered by him or one of his devoted fans.

If Bashar thought that unblocking these sites would have any implications on his power, he would not have unblocked them. The cult of personality in Syria is omnipresent with large pictures of Bashar on many buildings, in all shops and even on the rear window of some taxis. Bashar is however, smarter than your average dictator.

I noticed after a couple of months living in Syria everyone had the exact same opinion of Basher, expressed in the exact same way. "Bashar wants reform but he is surrounded by corrupt men". This was the only view I ever heard, from close friends to colleagues to my local butcher.

Maybe it's true, either way Bashar's playing a very smart game. He has removed himself from blame for the terrible lack of progress that has been made in Syria in the ten years he has been in power. Food and housing prices coupled with low wages and endemic corruption are only worsening.

Activists and bloggers are frequently placed in gaol with little or no trial and freedom of the press is somewhat limited by the free reign the censors have over content. This is all made possible by the 'Emergency' law in place since 1962 which strips away the vast majority of civil rights guaranteed by the constitution.

Speaking to my friend recently he told me people are still frightened because although these sites are now allowed, the internet is still heavily monitored and the rules may change at any time. As there has been no official announcement of the ban being lifted, predicting the mood of the regime is difficult.

This is not to say that Syria has not moved in the right direction, but when many of the population have been using social media sites already, no change in the law has occurred and Bashar has removed himself from blame, it's difficult to get that excited about it.

This article by Amanda Nunn.

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