



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

### **Written statement\* submitted by Reporters Without Borders International, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[21 August 2013]

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## **The dire situation of journalists in Syria**

Around 100 news providers have been killed while covering the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic since it began in March 2011. They include 24 professional journalists (six of them foreign) and around 70 citizen-journalists, all of them Syrian. A total of 14 foreign journalists are currently detained, abducted or missing, and more than 50 Syrian news providers are detained or abducted.

Bashar Al-Assad's government – both its regular army and its militias, known as the Shabihas – was responsible for all the abuses affecting news providers until the end of June 2012.

Ever since the start of the uprising in March 2011, the government has used all of the resources at its disposal not only to suppress peaceful demonstrations but also to limit the flow of information about its crackdown. These resources have included arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, trials by special courts, enforced disappearances and targeted murders. This is the fate that many citizens have suffered – both professional journalists and ordinary citizens acting as journalists – when they tried to document the authorities' abuses.

The resources deployed by the government to go after its opponents have also included a “cyber-army,” which it has used to identify those playing an important role in the transmission of information in order to be able to silence them. Foreign technologies have been used to ensure that the work of identification is more effective.

At the same time, in June 2011, the authorities began reducing the visas for foreign journalists to a trickle, cherry-picking those who received this precious favour. This is still the policy although the government, now more confident about its future, has of late apparently begun to increase the number of beneficiaries. These foreign reporters are subject to constant surveillance while in Syria and are not given access to the entire country.

Like the cyber-army, the government and pro-government media continue to be used as tools for relaying the government's propaganda, deploying a violent, hate-ridden and Manichean rhetoric to keep insisting that the uprising – which had its origin in peaceful mass demonstrations – is the result of a conspiracy by foreign terrorists to destabilize Syrian.

Many foreign journalists have chosen to enter Syria illegally, usually via Lebanon or Turkey, because of this policy and because of the government's determination to restrict their movements (and coverage of its crackdown). In March 2012, the Syrian information minister threatened to take measures against Arab and other foreign media, their journalists who entered the country illegally, and all those who assisted them. The minister accused them of complicity with the “terrorists” because they were covering their activities, “defending their crimes” and “fabricating false information.” In June 2013, the president had a law passed that reinforced the penalties for all those entering the country illegally. They now face up to five years in prison.

In late June 2012, the armed groups opposed to the government began targeting journalists employed by government or pro-government media. The premises of the pro-government TV station Al-Ikhbariya were attacked on 27 June 2012. Then a number of journalists were deliberately targeted (killed or kidnapped) because they worked for government or pro-government media.

Since late 2012, armed opposition forces controlling “liberated areas” in the north of the country have behaved in an increasingly intolerant manner towards what they regard as negative portrayals of the revolution.

After the United States added Jabhat Al-Nosra to its list of terrorist organizations (on 11 December 2012), many foreign journalists were accused of covering the conflict “incorrectly,” giving a “false” picture of the revolution, talking solely about the “Jabhat Al-Nosra Islamists” and thereby supporting Bashar Al-Assad's claim that his opponents are all terrorists. Some journalists were soon accused of being spies in the pay of Damascus. Many were threatened and some were kidnapped. Some foreign journalists talk of a blacklist – compiled by armed opposition groups together with certain media centres – of journalists banned from entering Syria under pain of abduction.

In the spring of 2013, Syrian journalists and citizen-journalists with no affiliation to the authorities began being the target of arrest, detention or abduction following the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the “liberated areas.” ISIS is aiming to differentiate itself from Jabhat Al-Nosra and strengthen its control over these areas in the north. In these territories, those who try to describe abuses by armed opposition groups against the civilian population or the rivalry between these groups are themselves targeted. ISIS and to a lesser extent Jabhat Al-Nosra aim to “moralize” the behaviour of Syrians in the areas they control, enforcing a conservative Islam and using religion to govern.

Another disturbing tendency is the growing number of arrests by the “Hayah Al Shareia” or “Judicial Committees” that the armed opposition groups have created to administer justice in the areas they control.

After taking eastern Aleppo, the various rebel brigades or liwa set up the Aleppo United Court in September 2012 as part of an attempt to create a new civilian administration and to punish mistreatment of the civilian population by Free Syrian Army members. This court was meant to extend its authority over the rest of Aleppo province and to coordinate the creation of local courts in each town but a lack of resources undermined day-to-day operations and opened the way for other initiatives, above all the creation of the “Hayah Al Shareia” in November 2012. The Aleppo “Hayah Al Shareia” has also tended to lose influence there following Jabhat Al-Nosra's withdrawal in March 2013.

In Aleppo, the two court systems have begun to compete with each other. The United Court has lost influence for lack of funding, while the “Hayah Al-Shareia” are refusing to cooperate with Aleppo's civilian institutions. The Aleppo “Hayah Al Shareia” is trying to coordinate the activities of its counterparts in other liberated areas with the aim of standardizing practices and rulings, but some are resisting this centralization initiative. And ISIS seems to be trying to control the “Hayah Al Shareia” in the liberated areas it controls.

These different courts apply different laws, depending on the judge and the political tendency of the group controlling the territory. They base their decisions directly on religious texts or the Arab League's United Arab Code. The absence of a single body of law and the lack of coordination between these committees results in arbitrary decisions on detainee rights and sentencing.

Faced by the repression orchestrated by the authorities and the growing threat from armed opposition groups, especially ISIS and, to a lesser degree, Jabhat Al-Nosra, many news providers have fled the country or have tried to do so. Reporters Without Borders has registered more than 100 cases of journalists and citizen-journalists fleeing into exile since March 2011.