

# Syria - Media Landscape

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## Overview

In 2017, the UN defined the conflict in Syria as the “the worst man-made disaster since World War II.” Now that the war in Syria entered in its tenth year, military operations are mainly concentrated in the northwest of the country and since the March 2020 agreement between Turkey and Russia to a cease-fire in Idlib, have significantly decreased. However, living standards of ordinary Syrians have worsened, due to the rapid collapse of the Syrian pound (SYP), which has plummeted to record lows. Moreover, the progressive distrust in the Syrian market and the decrease in investments entailed by the Caesar Act - entered into force on 17 June 2020 and applying new sanctions on any person, company or institution that does business with or provides support to the government - has contributed to further exacerbate the precarious conditions of Syrian people. Economic hardship has triggered a new wave of protests, scattered in some urban centres, but mostly erupted in rural areas. However, these protests have failed to become a nationwide movement, because had no connection with each other and lacked a shared common ground.

In this fluid and volatile context, this report cannot be considered exhaustive of all dynamics and phenomena regarding media issues in Syria, for the extreme difficulties in conducting field interviews and collecting reliable data and updated information on the various themes. Furthermore, local fragmentation in Syria has intensified and multiplied in recent years. Therefore, also from the media point of view, at least three different ‘Syrias’ should be taken into account in fact. What is true in one area of the country does not necessarily apply to the others. For this reason, in each section of this analysis three different ‘countries’ will be examined: 1) Government-held areas, 2) Opposition-controlled territories and 3) Kurdish-majority zones. Not all the topics are relevant in the same way to the three Syrias and, in some cases, differences can be found also within these same macro-areas, but - where possible - distinctions will be made. In the course of time, Syrian Government and his allies have continuously retaken territories from independent groups. However, in some cases its power is merely formal, having ceded the real authority to mediators, warlords, foreign forces and their proxies. Since 2018, the area known as Greater Idlib and its immediate surroundings in northwest Syria—consisting of rural northern Latakia, northwestern Hama, and western Aleppo—has remained the last swathe of the country in the hands of insurgents, even though Turkey exerts a tremendous power through its military, security, economic and political representatives. The alternative government is in fact the Turkey-controlled Syrian Salvation Government, with its different ministries and local councils and the de facto Turkey proxy jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has become the hegemonic actor, with a particularly strong presence in the countryside closer to the Turkish border. Turkey has been increasing its efforts to extend its control all along the northern border of Syrian territory: areas east of the Euphrates River in the Kurdish majority zones—from Afrin in the west to Tall Tamr in the east—were occupied by Turkey and are now controlled by Turkey-backed militias. The Turkish October offensive in the northeast allowed Russia and the Syrian government to cross the Euphrates and reach the areas of Raqqa and Manbij, strengthening their positions in Qamishli and Hasaka. On the other hand, near the southern border there is another zone not

controlled by the Syrian Government, the 55 km area around the al-Tanf air base held by the US troops and surrounded by Russian, Iranian and Syrian Army forces. Despite recurrent withdrawal announcements from Syria, the US still maintain in fact their military presence in the eastern part of the country, officially supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in their anti-IS operations. There are still Islamic State Organisation (IS) residual forces in Syria, that, after the group was pushed out of its territory and its last stronghold was conquered by SDF in March 2019, have since used guerrilla tactics to attack security forces and civilians. In the oil-rich and highly-strategic northeastern provinces of Qamishli and Hasake, the US and Russia coordinate their activities. Russia tries also to expand its influence by giving support to Government forces in retaking control of Raqqa countryside and the eastern branch of the M4 highway. At the same time, Russia competes with Iran over energy resources and routes control in the western and central regions of Syria.

Apart from the geographical differences, another distinction has to be made between established media (pro-government) and emerging media (post 2011). The development of the media field is the product of the authoritarian pre 2011 context and the ongoing conflict, which has resulted so far in the death of hundreds of thousands of people and the displacement of an estimated 11 million Syrians. The popular uprising that broke up in March 2011, cracked down by the government and the subsequent escalation of violence by all the actors involved in the conflict, has led to a gradual descent into regional war, which has transformed the country - according to the New York-based organisation Reporters Without Borders - into one of the world's most dangerous country for journalists, with extremely high risk of arrest, abduction or death. In fact, as the figures released by the Syrian Network for Human Rights state, 707 citizen journalists were killed in the country from March 2011 until April 2020 and 422 are still detained, mostly by the Syrian government. Nevertheless, there has been a true explosion of "independent media" after 2011, many of which, after reaching the peak in 2013, have since closed. The proliferation of media institutions has been quite chaotic and only recently people working in the field have become more aware of the importance of stronger institutionalisation. Also the Kurdish context has been affected by this break-with-the-past attitude. The repression and oppression by the government went further than in any other region: Kurdish language was banned until 2011 and any cultural expression of Kurdish identity was prohibited. With the autonomy self-proclaimed in 2016, for the first time in recent years a high number of local outlets in Kurdish were launched. The de facto neutrality of Rojava during clashes between the Syrian regime and the opposition forces has created a favourable environment for media institutions, with fewer restrictions than in the rest of Syria. However, local media are highly politicised and, being most of them affiliated with political parties, all too often biased.

Political and sectarian fragmentation and polarisation in the different areas of Syria have an immediate effect on the structure of the media landscape, not only at a local, but also national level. Politics through its partisan and armed structures has a direct influence over media production.

In government-held areas the Syrian media scene remains largely dominated by pro-government news sources. In this rapidly changing environment, though, the government has not remained behind. It has tried to update its media system, not by establishing new outlets, but by developing those already existing. Moreover, in recent years, especially local media (devoted for example to a specific city or region, or available only on Facebook) have gained relatively more independence. In such areas as Tartus, Latakia, Hama, local media running only on Facebook pages have managed to exert some kind of pressure on both local and central authorities and at this level, journalists have learnt whether and how to cross certain red lines. They have been able to denounce episodes of corruption in a frame of distorted governance dynamics, succeeding in circumventing censorship by not calling into question the status quo and not explicitly taking political stances. In opposition-held areas, the only real independent media are those funded by foreign INGOs, which for structural and economic reasons cannot invest as much and play the same role as the regional and local actors directly or indirectly involved in the conflict do. However, very local and grass-roots independent media initiatives in the years have proved resilient to openly denounce the socio-economic injustices of despotic local, central or foreign authorities.

In Kurdish areas, the main division is between the PYD and its supporters on the one hand and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) - the largest party in Iraqi Kurdistan - and its affiliates on the other. A high number of journalists have reported being subjected to pressures on the side of the PYD and its supporters. Thanks to these connections with Kurdish parties, media outlets in Rojava have comparably more funds. It is the only area, for example, where TV stations have been established: Ronahi (linked to PYD) and Zagros TV (affiliated to KDP). It is not by coincidence that Ronahi newspaper has a circulation of 10,000 copies in Rojava, much more than what any independent media can afford.

Overall, the current conflict has encouraged professionalisation. The general context is mainly characterised by widespread improvisation, lack of long-term strategies and pressures and interferences not only from foreign actors, but also on the part of other Syrians with conflicting agendas. However, questioning the existing status quo has broken the deadlock in the media system and subverted the journalism culture, which for decades was completely absent under the Baathist rule. In 2010, immediately before the unrest that broke out in the country, Syria was ranked 173rd out of 178 in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index. President Bashar al-Asad appeared on the organisation's list of Predators of Press Freedom and the country was among the Enemies of the Internet. The previous year, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists placed Syria among the ten worst countries to be a blogger in 2009. There is much to do and what has been done since 2011 - even when in good faith - is not all to be saved. In none of the three Syrias taken into account there are schools of journalism conforming to Western standards. University institutions in government-controlled Syria or those emerging in Rojava do not offer real chances for improvement, due to lack of opportunities, prospects, political openness.

State interference in the media landscape varies according to the areas of the country. For instance, in governmental Syria, since the Baath coup of 1963, the function of the mass media has been conceived to be that of "guiding public opinion" and "consolidating the gains of Arab nationalism." Institutions in general - and also those involved in publishing and broadcasting - would actually support the government's activity, rather than monitor it. The first 'media revolution' took place in 1995 with the introduction of satellites, which opened a window to the external world for Syrians. The first private media institutions were permitted, but they were actually placed under a total state control. Moreover, only well-entrenched insiders with privileged positions were able to gain access to the sector. The second major change was the arrival of the Internet. But once again, service providers are companies run by or affiliated to the government. Numerous websites are blocked, Internet use is monitored and the correspondence is tracked, so Syrians wishing to access uncensored information have been forced to get around censorship by using proxy servers. The state control over media is less strong in the opposition-held areas, mainly due to the absence of a strong unitary authority. Armed militias and their political bodies try - sometimes successfully - to exert their authoritative influence on local media. The overall absence of a well-defined regulatory framework governing media in these zones makes all too often the journalistic practice a dangerous activity, with some factions kidnapping and detaining journalists, but also sometimes destroying equipment and facilities. However, thanks to the support of international NGOs since 2012, these emerging media outlets have reached a greater level of autonomy, albeit with extreme difficulties. Their local impact is often quite limited, though, also because many of them are legally and physically based in Turkey losing their direct contact with the reality on the ground.

## Media

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### Print

The print news scene is clearly dominated by official government-controlled newspapers. Emerging media still struggle to gain a considerable audience inside the country, because they are relatively young, they do not have sufficient resources and the situation on the ground poses many obstacles to the circulation. According to the findings of the 2016 study carried by FPU et al, opposition journals (among which, only few still exist today, such as Hibr, a weekly magazine from Aleppo, Enab Baladi, a weekly magazine, firstly printed in Daraya and now in northern Syria) tend to lag well behind the government-controlled newspapers in percentage terms on the list of most-read newspapers.

### **Government-held areas**

Currently in Syria there are three state-run political dailies (Al-Thawra and its five local editions, Tishrin and al-Baath,) and two private dailies (Al-Watan and Baladna). For decades, the first pages on domestic and regional affairs of the state-run dailies have been mere patchworks of the press releases published by the official news agency Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), the mouthpiece of the government. Al-Watan is owned by a cartel of wealthy businessmen close to the Asad family and it began publication in November 2006. Its primary financial backer is President Bashar al-Asad's cousin Rami Makhluf, while a major advertising group owned by Haidara Suleiman, son of Bahjat Sulayman, former senior intelligence officer, runs the non-political daily Baladna. Until June 2008 there was also the state-run English-language daily The Syria Times, which in 2012 reappeared, but only on the Internet. There are no independent sources for newspaper circulation: Tishrin claims that the circulation of both Tishrin and Thawra is around 80,000 copies per day. Al-Baath claims to print around 25,000-30,000 copies a day (Media Sustainability Index, 2009). However, according to the WAN-IFRA World Press Trend 2016 report, in 2015 print newspapers had an average monthly reach of 10.5 percent, once again illustrating that Syrians have largely shifted to the Internet for their news. As suggested by the monolithic ownership and control of Syria's daily press, there are no divergences between the three state-run dailies and the official news agency SANA. The first pages of al Thawra, Tishrin and al-Baath offer always the same news appeared the day before on SANA's website. The only difference is the position of the news articles inside the page. On the other hand, Al-Watan shows a more independent attitude and language but this apparent freedom is very often used to promote a more aggressive pro-government policy. However, due to recent tensions mounted between Rami Makhluf and his cousin Bashar al-Asad, since 2019 Al-Watan has started to openly criticise some influential businessmen linked to the ruling family, which is a very rare move for a Syrian media outlet.

### **Opposition-controlled territories and Kurdish-majority zones**

The majority of opposition-aligned publications have been published and distributed mainly in electronic format and their number reached its peak in 2013. Since 2011, only two daily independent newspapers have existed: Al-Khabar, published until April 2016 in Duma by the Damascus Countryside Reporters Network (DCRN) and distributed only in Eastern Ghuta and Suriya al-Yawm, issued by the National Change Current, which stopped in 2015. The lack of daily newspapers reveals that news items are usually secondary in importance to features and opinion articles. Only major news (or those relating specifically to the region of interest/focus of the outlet) in fact feature in weekly newspapers and they are predominantly concerned with the military conflict. In geographical terms, the majority of issues focus obviously on Aleppo and Idlib governorates, since reporters can work with relatively higher freedom in these areas. However, there are reports also from Damascus and Latakia (both under government control).

There are emerging publications devoted to children and young adults ('Ata' and Ghiras still in activity); to women issues (none of them is still printed, but Mazaya continues posting news on their Facebook pages and Sayyidat Suriya has a website in Arabic and German); to human rights issues (Al-Kawakibi, issued in Arabic and English, that ceased publication at the beginning of 2017); one specialised in infographics (AIN Infographics that is still available in electronic format). In June 2016 an online weekly magazine called lba' was launched. Although it portrays itself as an independent media platform, observers

assume the lba' network is affiliated with the islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). After an online initial circulation, hard copies of the magazine started to be published and distributed. Even though not much is known about the processes of printing and distribution, local sources confirmed to scholar Haid Haid that copies of lba' are usually handed out by individuals in public places. Therefore, the paper does not have a reliable distribution system, nor fixed distribution points and its propagation is largely limited to the main urban centres and HTS's strongholds.

Since 2011, three Kurdish publications have been established: Buyer, Shar, Welat that now are available only online, though. They publish both in Kurdish and Arabic. In Kurdish-controlled regions, the distribution is subject to the approval of the local autonomous administration.

## Radio

Public access to radio as a news source is limited. In the 2016 FPU et al research, pro-government channels dominate, with *Sham FM* ranking first, but there are a couple of exceptions represented by *Radio Fresh* and *Hawa Smart* (respectively, 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> in the list of most followed radio channels).

### **Government-held areas**

Syria's own national broadcasting organisation was founded in 1946 but did not receive much in the way of government funds or attention until the early 1960s. Today, the Baathist-run Directorate-General of Radio and Television operates two radio stations in Arabic: *Sawt al-Sha'b* and *Idha'at Dimashq* (Radio Damascus), which is the main Arabic-language station and broadcasts from studios in Damascus, with content similar to that of Syria's state-controlled press. The second station, *Sawt al-Sha'b* (Voice of the People) started in 1978. In early 2007, private radio stations began broadcasting in the country after years of state monopoly. Currently, there are two state-run radio-stations and 12 private ones; *Al-Madina* FM was the first private radio station. Private radio stations can only apply for an entertainment license, therefore cannot transmit news or political content. Some private radios - such as *Sawt Shabab*, *Radio Sham*, *Suriyatna* - focus mainly on social, cultural and arts programmes.

### **Opposition-controlled territories**

In general, the audience of Syrian independent radio stations is quite limited. The maintenance of the FM transmitters and towers is among the major technical problems for their sustainability. Apart from this, small radios can hardly compete with other bigger organisations and especially TV stations. It is no coincidence that community radios seems to have a deeper impact on the ground. Radio Fresh, based in Kafr Nabl (Idlib), engages with social activities on the ground that apparently contribute to increasing its strength. In November 2018, its founder, Raed Fares was shot dead with the reporter Hamud Junayd. No group has claimed responsibility for their killing, and Fares had been targeted by militants and government forces alike, but Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which was controlling the town at the time of the attack, had previously threatened and abducted the activist. In May 2019, after being hit by a barrel bomb, the radio facilities moved to the northern countryside of Idlib.

None of these independent media institutions are in fact registered as radios, though, but they are often registered as commercial and production companies in Turkey (almost all of the radios are based in Gaziantep or Istanbul), or as NGOs in Europe. In this sense, all of them have to be considered "pirate radios" broadcasting without a legal license. Nonetheless, since 2011, Syrian radio stations have gone through a gradual but constant process of institutionalisation and professionalisation. Of these, Hara is part of the Syrian Media Group, registered in Turkey and Hawa Smart is part of the SMART Network registered in Europe. Fresh is the only Syrian radio based inside Syria, which explains why it is not registered. Almost all the independent radios have their main offices outside Syria, even if a lot of stations have opened small

offices inside the country, especially to better transmit their signals. Therefore there is the actual risk that they increasingly lose touch with the reality on the ground and with the audience inside the country.

### ***Kurdish-majority zones***

As for other media in Rojava, radio stations aligned with political parties have a higher impact and diffusion than independent ones. However, some Kurdish independent radio stations, such as *Radio Arta* and to a lesser extent *Hevi* and *Welat* can reach larger audiences than those radios lined up with political parties (*Orkesh* and *Judy FM* of PYD, or *Rudaw Radio* of KDP). In particular, according to an informal survey conducted by the Washington-based Navanti Group in September 2015 in Aleppo, Idlib and al-Hasaka governorates, *Arta FM* appears to be the most listened-to radio station in northern Syria, with a listener share of 69,4 percent in the Jazira region.

## **Television**

Pan-Arab/International TV and Syrian TV stations and news websites are the dominant source of news. According to the findings of the 2016 survey by FPU et al , *Sama TV* (a pro-government channel) is the most watched TV source. Other pro-government channels (such as *Al-Ikhbariyya Al-Suriyya*, *Al-Fada'iyya* and *Addounia*) feature high in the list. Only a few non government-controlled channels are among the ten most followed stations, such as *Halab al-Yawm* and *Orient TV*. With regard to pan-Arab/International TV, unlike local TVs, where pro-government channels dominate, the top-ranked pan-Arab/International TV stations tend to be mixed between pro- and anti-Syrian government channels. In early 2011, trying to counter the narrative spread by pan-Arab *Al-Jazira* and *Al-Arabiya*, authorities started a campaign to substitute satellite dishes with centralised cable TV systems for each building, under the pretence of protecting “urban decorum.” Eventually they gave up, but since then *Al-Mayadin* satellite television (closely tied to Iran) has been launched and a Russian channel in Arabic was enforced. This was considered a more effective and feasible way to counterbalance the rhetoric used by the two pro-opposition pan-Arab TVs, respectively owned by Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

### ***Government-held areas***

Syrian television, like all the other media, is tightly controlled. Syrian channels are mostly owned and controlled by the Syrian Arab Television and Radio Broadcasting Commission (SATRBC) connected to the Ministry of Information. Currently, the state operates two terrestrial TVs (*Al-Ula* and *Al-Thaniya*), three state satellite channels (*Al-Fada'iyya*, *Al-Ikhbariyya* also known as *Syria News* and *Suriya Drama*) and one private station, *Addounia*. Owned by another consortium of seven damascene businessmen close to the Asads, *Addounia* started its broadcastings in 2007 and during the uprising it has been submitted to EU, US and Arab League sanctions. Like *Al-Watan* newspaper, *Addounia TV* is apparently free of violating the official red lines, but when it happens it is always in order to defend the government’s stances against “fabricated accusations.” In September 2012, Syrian television channels - including *Addounia TV* - were removed from Arabsat and Nilesat. After an 18-month suspension, *Addounia* returned on Nilesat. In February 2009, the Syrian authorities closed the religious television station *Al-Da'wa* only three months after the station officially opened.

Government-controlled media, such *Al-Sama*, *Al-Ikhbariyya*, *Al-Fada'iyya* and *Addounia* are the most followed in areas falling under government control, but also register a significant following in opposition-held areas (FPU et al, 2016). This may suggest that audience in government-controlled regions is almost fully supportive of government-controlled media. Or that people living in government-controlled areas fear to divulge whether they follow opposition media outlets.

### ***Opposition-controlled territories and Kurdish-majority zones***

Between 2009 and 2010, another private satellite TV operated in Syria, avoiding domestic media restrictions: *Orient TV*,

owned by Ghassan Abbud, a Syrian businessman opposed to the government. Just one year and a half after it started its official broadcasts (from the United Arab Emirates, but with reporters inside Syria) authorities closed its Damascene office in July 2010. This closure was a response to the station's popular talk shows on social, economic and cultural issues, viewed by authorities as a podium for civil society. Prominent opposition channels like Halab al-Yawm (which broadcast on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter) and Orient TV are barely watched in government-controlled regions, but these rank as the top three in opposition-controlled areas. Here the 2016 FUP findings reveal that, even if a slight majority follows opposition media, a significant minority also follows government-controlled media. In March 2018, Syria TV, a pro-opposition TV network was launched in Istanbul and boasts a majority Syrian crew mainly based in Turkey and a team of correspondents in Syria and neighbouring countries. The channel's CEO Anas Azraq told *The New Arab* during an interview that the channel works "to transmit the values of the revolution" and that intends to fill a void in the partisan Syrian media landscape.

Kurdish parties like the PYD and the KDP are the only ones that can control - more or less directly - television stations in Rojava. The PYD opened *Ronahi* TV in 2012, whilst in 2007 the KDP established its TV channel, *Zagros* TV, in Erbil, in Iraqi Kurdistan, from where it broadcasts to Syria.

## Digital Media

According to the latest available statistics, there are more than 7.6 million Internet users in Syria (Internet world stats, December 2019), with a penetration of 43.5 percent of the population. However, reliable Internet connectivity remains a major challenge throughout the country.

In 1994, after the sudden death of his older brother Basel, Bashar al-Asad came back from London to become the future successor of his father Hafez. In the same year, he founded *Al-Jam'iyya al-'ilmiyya al-ma'lumatiyya al-suriyya* ( Syrian Computer Society -SCS, ) with the declared aim to "diffuse the computer culture in Syria." Six years later, when Bashar took the reins of power after the death of Hafez al-Asad, there were only around 7,000 computers connected to the Internet in the country, with all portals connected to a single government-run server that kept track of every password. Syrian authorities restricted licenses to institutions and a few professors and business owners, while Internet cafés were not permitted. In 2010, prior to the outburst of the revolt, the country had almost four million Internet users (17.7 percent of the population), but only 861,000 subscribers, according to the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE). The majority of Syrians used to access the Internet from cafés and even satellite Internet was forbidden and required a security license. The Syrian authorities in fact transformed their Internet into an intranet by preventing access to a long list of websites. In 2009, at least 150 websites remain blocked, including the majority of sites run by ethnic minorities or political movements perceived to be opposed to the authorities in Damascus. Social networking sites including Facebook and YouTube remain blocked, but Syrians have become adept at using proxy servers to circumvent the ban. At this regard, Amjad Bajazi - author of a study titled *Syria's Cyber Wars* points out that many news services and youth magazines have started on Facebook. These journals are specialised in providing news on Syria and they have a larger margin of freedom than printed magazines. He quotes journalist and analyst Wael Sawah about the important role played by new media in "campaigns, as several were launched in 2009 by civil society actors and people eager for change simultaneously. [...] A number of smaller campaigns have been taking place since 2006, benefitting from the latest Internet and telecommunications technology. [...] All these campaigns shared certain features: they were all apolitical; they embraced different groups from Syrian society; and they relied on new tools such as blogs, mobile phones, Facebook and Twitter." At the end of 2009 a Facebook page of the Jamal al-Atasi Forum for Democratic Dialogue appeared on Facebook after it had been physically closed in 2005. "Our goal is simple," said Suhayr al-Atassi, the forum's president. "We want to pursue the dialogue that had been interrupted, in order to reach a deeper understanding of our causes and find solutions together." In the same days, Syrian authorities arrested blogger and high school student Tal al-Malluhi after she published poems and articles commiserating Palestinian refugees. Some weeks

before, in September 2009, blogger Karim Arbaji was sentenced to three years in prison on charges of spreading “false information that can weaken national sentiment.” Arbaji was the moderator of *Akhawia.net*, a popular online youth forum that contained criticisms of the government.

In more recent times, especially after 2011, some Internet websites were unblocked and become highly accessible to a large sector of the Syrian public, however new blocks were imposed during the last two years. No formal reasons have been provided for many past decisions to block or unblock websites. For example, as reported by Freedom House 2019 Report, a number of pan-Arab media sites were unblocked without explanation by the end of 2017, including Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, Asharq al-Awsat, Al-Arab and Al-Hayat; and even the block on the Israeli country domain (.il) was lifted. According to Alexa global ranking system (June 2020), the most visited websites in the country are Youtube, Facebook and Wikipedia. Among the media pages, the media outlet that ranks highest (8th) is the Russian state-controlled English-language RT site, which “brings the Russian view on global news”, as stated on its website. After it, on the 12th position, comes al-Alam TV, an Iranian pro-government Arabic-speaking news site and only 18th SANA. Trend wise, the vast majority of local and independent media, both pro- and anti-government, do not possess a website, but only pages on Facebook. The mobile phone has becoming increasingly widespread in the years as a news source and is now probably the main source of information for many Syrian people. This tendency might be due to the already mentioned exclusive presence of the majority independent media outlets on Facebook, but also to the total censorship imposed by the government on many opposition websites and on those that in someway sympathise with their stances. This means that visitors inside Syria can only access these websites using proxy servers, but, as their traffic is routed through IP addresses in a second country, such visitors’ access is not registered as coming from Syria. In general, the Internet as a source of information is seen less trustworthy than other forms of traditional media. However, few Syrians use all kinds of online advanced verification tools to check information. The explanation for this digital distrust can be twofold: Online media are a relatively new or unfamiliar technology for a large part of the audience; or the online content does not match their perceptions as much as traditional media content. According to the mentioned 2016 FPU et al survey, Facebook is the highest-rated application for verifying information, topping the list at 33 percent, followed by Google (14 percent) and SANA website (12 percent).

In general, there are many Syrian websites completely devoted to news, but no one could be considered unbiased and fully reliable as each one is promoting a partial narrative. For instance, on the opposition-aligned side there is the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) and on the other side, the Iranian-dominated Military Media Center. Among others, there are: the long-standing pro-opposition and secular website Kulluna Shuraka’ (AllForSyria) founded in the early 2000s by the then-exiled dissident Ayman Abd al-Nur and now active only on Facebook; the conservative Shaam.org created in 2011, the pro-opposition Enab Baladi, Zaman al-Wasl, Durar al-Sham, Tahrir suri news platform and the website of opposition Al-Jisr TV. In the pro-government sphere, besides the website of SANA news agency, probably, the most influential media outlet on Facebook is Damascus Now, with more than 2.9 million followers, and also: Syria-News.com and SyriaNow. Other sources of news online are local media platforms (as Yawmiyyat Qadhifat Hawun or Focus Halab), which mainly function on Facebook.

## **Social Networks**

Kepios Digital 2020 report reveals 6 million active social media users in the country, with a penetration rate of 35 percent. WhatsApp and Facebook are the most used social media channels across Syria, with almost the totality of social media users who are current subscribers to WhatsApp. Facebook overshadows all other social media tools, with a number of users surpassing 6 million people (ASMR 2015). However, the use of Facebook remains more personal and information is primarily consumed and not produced. Proactive civic engagement is less than common. In fact, if most respondents to the 2016

Audience Research (FPU et al) never or rarely participate in online discussion forums, post an article or comment on a blog or news articles online; on the other hand the audience feels relatively more comfortable acting or reacting on social media: A higher share of respondents declares often or always posting articles (45 percent), photos (45 percent), or videos (34 percent).

The total number of active Twitter users in Syria has reached 136,000 users (ASMR, March 2014). As officially defined by Twitter, an “active user” is someone who logs in (but does not necessarily tweets) once a month. The current subscription rates for Twitter is therefore very low (14 percent), but, despite such a scarce Twitter penetration, users are apparently very active, because the daily usage in the country is among the highest in the Arab world. ASMR findings indicate that roughly a third of Syrian users (30 percent) are females, which is lower than the global average, where females make up 59 percent of users. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the use of Telegram and Instagram has increased in the last few years, but no data are available on specific figures.

## Opinion Makers

Independent voices from inside Syria are often impossible to verify. Although there are no statistics on blog rankings in Syria, some writers, bloggers and dissidents have become widely known (also abroad) by providing regular, interesting news, views and opinions on events from inside and outside the country. Checking the ten Twitter accounts with the highest number of followers in Syria gives very thought-provoking insights. If in the past years among the most followed accounts there was a profile collecting verses by late controversial Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani and two accounts devoted to Ghada Samman, another much-loved and just as much controversial Syrian writer, today, in 2020, Syrian celebrities dominate the top ten list. Singer Assala Nasri ranks 1st not only on Twitter, but also on Facebook (with more than 4 million followers on Twitter and more than 16 million followers on Facebook), accompanied by other two singers Farrah Yousef (6th) and ‘Abd al-Karim Hamdan (10th), football player Omar al-Somah (4th), actors Kinda Alloush (5th) and Kosai Khauli (7th). With 3.3 million followers, the second most popular account belongs to Adnan al-Arour, a Sunni cleric who became widely known for his support to armed opposition in Syria since the beginning of the uprising. His views once dismissed as “extreme” have acquired an increasing popularity with the exacerbation of the conflict and the increase in sectarian polarisation. From the media sector, if compared to the previous years, in the top ten there is now only Hadi al-Abdallah, a Syrian citizen journalist and activist who was awarded the Press Freedom Prize by Reporters Without Borders (RWB) in November 2016. The Sham Network of the namesake opposition media outlet has lost positions, if compared to the previous years, but it still enjoy millions of followers on Facebook and almost 460 thousand on Twitter. The account belonging to Amanat muhafazat Jeddah (the Jeddah Municipality) ranks third. A new-entry among the most followed personalities is Qubad Talabani, son of Jalal Talabani, who has been serving as Deputy Prime Minister of Kurdistan since 2012. Beyond the outcomes of Twitter data, there are some prominent Syrian opinion makers that represent the main dominating narratives in the overall polarised war context. Among them there is Faysal al-Qasim, the famous Al-Jazira anchorman living in Qatar. For years he has taken overtly harsh anti-government positions and on his Facebook pages enjoys more than 131 million likes. In the same pro-opposition sphere, there are other relevant opinion makers followed by hundreds of thousand social media users as long-standing jailed dissident and exiled intellectual Yasin Hajj Salih and leftist newspaper columnist Tha’ir Ali Deeb. Another influent figure is Usama Sulayman, aka Rami Abderrahman, founder and director of the Syrian Observer for Human Rights (SOHR). He appears almost on a daily basis on the screens of pan-Arab and Syrian opposition-driven TVs. Among pro-government opinion-makers, there are prominent anchorpersons and war reporters of the main Damascus-based TVs, such as Wafa Duwyari and Majid Harmuz (Addouniya TV), Kinana Allush (Sama TV), Shadi Hilwa (Al-Ikhbariyya). Current minister of expatriates Buthayna Sha’ban is also a prominent columnist of the website of the pro-Iranian Beirut-based Al-Mayadin TV and she enjoys wide popularity in the pro-government audience.

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## Organisations

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### Trade Unions

#### ***Government-held areas***

The only official syndicate representing journalists is the *Ittihad al-suhufiyyin fi Suriya* (Union of Journalists in Syria- SJU). As any other professional syndicate in the country, is controlled by the Baath Party and belongs to the General Federation of Trade Unions, a nominally independent grouping that the government uses to control union activity. The Union was established in 1974. Art 3 of its charter states that the union is “a professional syndicate believing in the goals of the nation in unity, freedom and socialism and is committed to accomplish these goals according to the decisions and directions of the Socialist Arab Baath Party.” Its 16 aims range from watchfulness over the state apparatus, to traditional trade union activities, such as pressing for satisfactory pay and conditions, or settling professional disputes. Journalists are state employees who are accountable to their employer, the government, for what they write.

Wages, promotion and pensions are thus based on political criteria rather than skill, ability or dedication. The law governing membership of the Union of Journalists carries additional checks on the practice of journalism. The most crucial stipulation of this law is probably Art 11, which requires the syndicate's secretariat to prepare a list of all members of the syndicate and to classify them as working journalists, apprentices or associate journalists. The article also provides that a journalist does not have the right to practice his job as a journalist until his name is registered in the general list of syndicate members, which must be ratified by the Minister of Information. Most Syrian journalists used to join the SJU because legally any working journalist is required to join the union under Article 18 of the Syrian penal code.

In order to apply for membership of the syndicate, a journalist must fulfil numerous criteria and requires background checks and - in most cases - inside connections. Applicants must present a copy of their college degree, or provide a sample of no less than 20 published articles. They are required to have no legal blemishes or judicial judgments against them and, only after this process has been completed, a decision is then taken by the SJU. However, meeting the membership requirements

does not guarantee the applicant the status of “working” member, with health insurance and full retirement benefits. Most applicants are listed as “training” members and have no such guarantees.

Any journalist traveling outside Syria is required to submit an endorsement letter from their employer to the Syrian Information Ministry. As a consequence, the possibility to travel for Syrian reporters totally depends on the minister’s approval. But this does not entitle journalists to any form of protection, because even “working” members are not members of the SJU outside the country. Members who stop working in Syria automatically lose their membership.

Journalists working for private media outlets cannot join the syndicate, freelancers or journalists working as stringers for foreign agencies cannot join the SJU as “working” members before defining their status at the Ministry of Information.

Critics of the Union of Journalists point out that membership does not ensure protection, especially in case reporters or editors fail to support the government’s view. For example, in 2003, when the government shut down *Al-Dumari*, the country’s first independent satirical weekly founded by cartoonist Ali Farzat, the SJU not only failed to defend the magazine, but went after Farzat, who was then a member of the union, personally filing a legal suit with the Arab Writers Association to ban him from the syndicate itself.

The syndicate consists of the General Assembly, the Syndicate Council and the Executive Bureau, all of which are ultimately overseen by the Minister of Information. As is the case for all institutions in Syria, any change in the structure of the syndicate would question its relationship to the government. The General Assembly comprises all paid-up working member journalists and is the syndicate’s highest authority, charged with electing the Syndicate Council every four years, approving the budget and overseeing the syndicate’s internal organisation, except that the latter is not final until ratified by the Minister. Currently, according to the website of the Union, there are 1,704 “working” members and 639 apprentices. In October 2016, journalist Mousa Abdel Nour was appointed president of the SJU.

### ***Opposition-controlled territories and Kurdish-majority zones***

With the beginning of the uprising, many Syrian journalists opposing president al-Asad inside Syria and in exile in 2012 established the Damascus-based *Rabitat al-suhufiyyin al-suriyyin* (Syrian Journalists Association–, SJA), which the subsequent year was registered in France. The intent of the association is to contrast “the biased role” on the side of the regime played by the Union of Journalists. Inspired by freedom of expression and free access to information, the SJA declares its status as a democratic and independent association and its commitment to “the Syrian revolution’s goals and its calls for the freedom and dignity of the Syrian people.” Among its founding principles, the association promotes “equal opportunities to Syrian journalists from different ethnicities to write and reports news in their ethnic language such as Arabic, Kurdish, Assyrian, Turkmen and others”. Membership is open to all Syrian journalists and Palestinian journalists born in Syria working in print, broadcast and online journalism, whether they live inside or outside the country. In order to join the association, journalists need to provide a letter from their media outlets or obtain the approval of three founding members of the SJA. The association is mostly run by journalists that have left Syria in recent years and are currently based outside of the country. In September 2013, the Kurdistan Journalist Syndicate established its Syrian branch with the declared intent of defending Kurdish journalists both in Western Kurdistan and in Iraqi Kurdistan. The syndicate has also set up a code of honour for journalism.

## **Journalist Associations**

At the beginning of 2012, a group of Syrian writers decided to break up the monopoly of the state over unions and associations. They founded the Syrian Writers League, borrowing the name of their organisation from the first Syrian literary gathering, which was originally established in the 1950s. This was then replaced by the Arab Writers’ Union, established in

Damascus in 1969, a semi-official body, which operated to keep all writing within the purview of the government and the ruling Baath Party. Its role as enforcer of Syrian government wishes was demonstrated in 1995 when the union passed a resolution to expel two members because they “openly advocated normalisation with the Zionist entity.” One of the expelled members was the renowned Paris-based Syrian poet known as Adonis. The Union has been based, since 2015, in Abu Dhabi, after it was moved from Damascus to Cairo in 2008.

The two most relevant associations of Kurdish journalists in Syria are the League of Kurdish Writers and Journalists (HNRKS) and the General Union of Kurdish Writers and Journalists (YNRKS). They have issued several statements condemning the violations against journalists and freedom of press in the Kurdish-controlled area in the north of the country and published the names of writers and reporters detained in the prisons of PYD.

The increasing number of collaborations and the coordination between different people in the emerging media field have all contributed to develop Syrian independent journalism. All these initiatives not only help enhance the professional level but, even more importantly, they might pave the way to define the future values of the profession in the country and avoid problems, such as plagiarism or unfair competition. For example, the former ABRAJ Network was founded in November 2014 by six radios (which later became five) with the aim of supporting independent media in Syria and not only its members. The organisation helped to establish shared policies concerning salaries (creating a common front towards the donors to reduce unfair competition), turnover management, technical and content exchanges. Moreover, in June 2014 a Syrian Network for Print Media made by seven print publications (originally five) was established and mainly financed by International Media Support and the French operator in media cooperation (CFI). The main activity of the network is to organise a unified printing and distribution network, thereby cutting costs.

## **News Agencies**

The Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) was created in 1965 with the purpose of writing and distributing news, reports, photographs and commentary. Its board of directors is chaired by the Minister of Information or his deputy and the other board members are the director of SANA, the under-secretary of the Ministry of Information, the director-general of Al-Wahda (Organisation for Printing, Publishing and Distribution), the director of the Armed Forces' Public Affairs Directorate for Moral Guidance and an “expert in the media.” SANA maintains offices in over a dozen countries and employs hundreds of staffers. It supplies news copy to the newspapers, as well as to Syrian Arab Radio and Television.

Al-Wikala al-hurra li'l-anba' (Free News Agency) was founded by journalist Jamil Salou and is inspired to the principle of freedom of opinion and expression. SMART News Agency, which is based in Turkey, is an opposition-oriented agency launched in August 2013. It offers various news media (text, photographs, videos) in Arabic. This project was implemented by the French operator in media cooperation (CFI) and funded by the EU.

In 2017, the Wikalat al-Iba' al-Ikhbariyya (Iba' News Agency) was launched. The agency follows in the footsteps of IS's Amaq, reporting Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)'s military operations and propaganda, despite not being officially linked to the group.

In the Kurdish context, Hawar News Agency (ANHA) is an online Kurdish news service based in al-Hasaka, in the far northeastern corner of Syria and lined up with the PYD. Its website is available in Arabic, English, Kurdish, Russian, Spanish, Turkish. In 2013 another agency was established and gained great popularity Ajansa Rojnamevaniya Azad (Independent Press Agency - ARA News), but it closed in late 2017.

## **Audience measurement organisations**

Audience-measurement organisations require a political and economic context that allows for them to function and operate within a diverse and competitive media domain, where outlets compete over audiences and advertisers. In Syria, where the state used to control both the advertising market and the media, only occasionally and in partnership with authority-affiliated private organisations, audience-measurement systems had no presence until after 2011. However, due to the current state of conflict and the subsequent extreme difficulty of data collection, reliable, detailed and up-to-date researches on media audiences are absent. While online media organisations may be able to get some data through digital measurements, the composition of a reliable dataset requires interviews, ideally conducted inside the various (often contested and difficult-to-access) territories into which the country is now broken.

One of the earliest examples of a Syrian audience study was conducted in 2005 by InterMedia in Syria's big cities (including their suburban areas). The study showed that the Internet usage in pre-revolutionary Syria was limited and television - in particular government-owned and pan-Arab channels (like Al-Jazeera) - was the dominant source of information. The 2014 Audience Research report published by MICT5 is the subsequent substantial body of data and the first study conducted under "war conditions." It surveyed a sample of Syrians in both government-controlled and contested areas and also refugees in camps abroad. Once again, television was identified as the dominant source of information. Social media also appeared as an important channel, reflecting a surge in Internet use in the intervening years. Evidence from contacts inside the country suggests that these trends remain still valid today.

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## Policies

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### Media legislation

#### *Government-held areas*

The Arab press in the Mashreq area saw the light between Beirut and Damascus thanks to the efforts of Christian and Muslim intellectuals, who had often received their education in the secular and religious institutes set up by European missionaries and teachers in Ottoman Syria. On the one hand, the political overturning, ensued from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the French Mandate (1920-1946) over the two new national states (Lebanon and Syria), fostered political debates and gradually enlarged the public of readers; but on the other hand, it led to the first bans on freedom of expression and press. The French authorities repeatedly shut down the media belonging to the Syrian nationalists hostile to the policies dictated from Paris. The twenty years following the formal achievement of independence (1946) are described as the golden age of contemporary Syria. Until 1963, the year of the Baathist coup, there was a breath of unusual

openness, interrupted by authoritarian breaks. The Baathist government shut down all independent newspapers. The only newspaper pre-dating the coup that still exists is *Al-Baath* (Reawakening), the mouthpiece of the ruling party, founded in 1946 (see above). Since then, the situation has remained actually unchanged, despite the enactment of three different Constitutions in fifty years (1964, 1973, 2012) and an equal number of press laws. This is the repercussion of the binary shape featuring the structure of power: The institutional façade (the Constitutions, the laws and their ratified principles) does not mirror the reality on the ground, which is determined by the logics of effective power. In particular, thanks to the approval of the first press law under Hafez al-Asad (1970-2000) in 1974, the Syrian media became a vehicle to promote the cult of the President. The government can confiscate and destroy any work believed to be a potential threat to national security. There are certain taboos commonly known - religious and ethnic minorities, religion, references to sex, criticism directed at the state must be aimed only at state institutions without names. The President must never be mentioned with sarcasm or in a joke. As Lisa Weeden notes, all these unwritten prohibitions are perfectly understood by everyone.

After Bashar al-Asad succeeded his father in June 2000, a new press law, Decree No 50, known as the Publications Law, passed on 22 September 2001. The new press law, hailed by the authorities as a sign of liberalisation, legalised private media. However, the draconian regulation of content all but erased any apparent gains in freedom of expression. The law states that private presses are to be unrestricted in their operations. All periodicals must obtain licenses to publish by the Prime Minister - who may reject an application at any time for the sake of "public interest." They can lose their license and face extremely high fines (between 500,000 and 1m Syrian pounds) and/or up to three years' imprisonment if they publish "falsehoods" and "fabricated reports," report on military affairs, accept funds by foreign sources, incite public unrest or in any way threaten the "national interest".

In 2012, the new Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic came into force. In Articles 42 and 43 it guarantees the right for freedom of expression as well as freedom of the press. However, these rights can be restricted through several security-related regulations. For example in 2011, in response to the growing unrest that erupted across the country, the government proposed a package of legislative reforms and decided to repeal the Emergency Law, which had been in effect for 48 years. The abolition of this law, a key demand of protesters, represented a major change to the legal framework that supported the government's tight control on the citizens' freedoms and that listed an extensive variety of offences that could be invoked to restrain both writers and publications. In the same year, President al-Asad issued a legislative decree (No 108), which outlines what can be seen on paper as a lift of the oppressive media legislation. It states the absence of a "monopoly on the media" and guarantees the "right to access of information about public affairs" and bans "the arrest, questioning, or searching of journalists." In practice, however, these protections are virtually nonexistent in government-held areas. The legislation also contains several anti-press clauses, including barring the media from publishing content that affects "national unity and national security," or incites sectarian strife or "hate crimes" and forbids the publication of any information about the armed forces. It holds editors-in-chief, journalists and even spokespeople accountable for actions that constitute a violation of the law and prescribes fines of up to 1m Syrian pounds. Art3 states that the law "upholds freedom of expression guaranteed in the Syrian constitution," but Art4 says the media must "practice [their freedom of expression] with awareness and responsibility," without further clarification of the statement's meaning, which gives the authorities leeway to crack down on independent outlets. The law also calls for the establishment of the *Al-Majlis al-watani li'l-i'lam* (National Media Council - NMC) to regulate the information sector (see below).

Also Law No. 9328, known as the 1985 Law on Associations and Private Societies, can restrict the establishment of media organisations. The law regulates the establishment of any kind of association or organisation in the Syrian Arab Republic. Following this law, all meetings are strictly controlled. According to Art 26, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has the right to appoint board members of any association at any time and the law grants the Ministry the authority to dissolve associations "if the Ministry finds that there is no need for the services of the association" (Art 36). In addition to media laws,

security-related legislation has been used to control and punish journalists. In July 2012, after the Emergency Law was repealed, the government passed the Counter-Terrorism Law No 19, which has basically reinstated its emergency powers under a different name. Article 8, in particular, has in fact since targeted many civilians, charged with the accusation of “publicizing terrorist acts” and “promoting terrorist activities” - this same law describes a terrorist act as “every act that aims at creating a state of panic among the people, destabilizing public security.”

Additionally, journalists are required by law to divulge their sources when requested by authorities. According to the Penal Code, defamation is a crime, for which punishments vary between fines (starting from 100 pounds), to imprisonment, depending on the case and the subjects involved. Relying on the state-run SANA for most of their material, state-employed editorial staffs are required by law to undergo state-certified training and to register with the Union of Journalists, which is overseen by the Ministry of Information.

As for advertising revenue, the 2001 law confirms the monopoly of the government through the state-run Arab Advertising Organisation (AAO), which does not publish figures. As Bajazi points out, “commercial broadcasting companies can exist on the margin of the system, but they are usually controlled either by regime cronies or cash-rich state companies from outside the media sector.” The 2001 law also contains an article that prohibits media outlets from generating revenue by selling advertising space to foreign governments. Inside the Damascus’s Free Zone (DFZ), private media must pay taxes to the AAO only for Syrian advertisements or foreign advertisements that mention a Syrian name. Outside the DFZ, the authorities require private media to turn over 25 percent of all advertising revenue to the AAO and pay a 40 percent tax to the state-run Syrian Company for Distribution (SCD).

Almost all the aforementioned laws related to speech offences are equally applicable to the online environment, but in 2012 the president issued a specific decree known as the Cybercrime Law. This law criminalises illegal access to computer systems and websites without having the right or authority or permission to do so. It also punishes with imprisonment and/or a fine anyone who copies, uses or discloses information obtained by such illegal access. It therefore seems to replicate and adapt to the online environment the same prohibitions of the new Press Law regarding the publication of private information, even if that information is correct plus it also contains a number of measures restricting freedom of expression and the right to privacy. The most concerning provisions are those requiring Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to retain Internet traffic for an indeterminate period of time in order to identify content providers. It is further unclear whether access to that data is subject to a court order or judicial oversight. Moreover, the Cybercrime Law provides a legal basis for website filtering and blocking. In March 2018, this law was amended by Law No 9, which creates special courts of first instance (*bida'iyya* in the Syrian system) and delegates judges specifically trained for the prosecution of cybercrimes.

The government used to resort also to travel bans to silence journalists. The Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) issued a report in February 2009 listing 417 political and human-rights activists banned from traveling outside Syria.

Sources in areas under government rule refer that in the news kiosks nowadays there are only the three government newspapers and *Al-Watan*. In addition to these, it is still possible to find *Al-Nur*, (organ of one of the legal sections of the Syrian Communist Party) and *Qasiyun* (organ of the People’s Will Party). There are still some magazines, such as *Souriatna* (Our Syria), *Ta'min wa Ma'rifa*, *Masarif wa Ta'min* (devoted to banks, finance and insurances), *Al-Sahat* (Arenas). The financial magazine *Al-Iqtisadi* has suspended its paper version for lack of advertising revenues and survives only online. There is no trace of pan-Arab and Lebanese newspapers. The Arab satellite news channel *Al-Jazeera* has never been allowed to open a permanent bureau in the country, while local correspondents of *Al Arabiya* TV and *Al-Hayat* newspaper, both owned by the Saudis, should strictly compel to the rules imposed by authorities. Prior to 2011, self-censorship was widespread at all levels of the journalistic process, as it was the primary way of filtering information in Syria in public and

private media.

### ***Opposition-controlled territories***

The legal environment for the media in territories outside the government's influence varies, according to the group in control. Only over recent years media workers have started to realise the importance of having a comprehensive legal framework for their work. This helps reach different objectives: Firstly and foremost, they can protect their project from changing political climates (this is especially true for those organisations headquartered in Turkey) and therefore create a more stable organisation; finally, it helps to liaise with international donors and partners. If in the aftermath of the beginning of the uprising, almost no one had given serious consideration to the issue of licensing/registration, later this has clearly become much more present. There is a noticeable increase in their structuration and consolidation, with new management structures and administrative positions in many of the outlets. However, whilst - on the one hand - most media outlets seem to be more aware of the importance of such a stronger institutionalisation and are moving in this direction; on the other hand, this development is relatively inhibited by the general lack of the necessary skills and expertise.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights notes that the militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which controls large swathes of territory throughout Idlib governorate, tends to apply a policy of restrictive regulation of journalists and media outlet who allegedly pose a threat to the group's ideological hegemony and extremist approach. Also human Rights Watch has documented several cases in which the group detained Idlib residents, apparently because of their peaceful work documenting abuses or protesting the group's rule. For example, in January 2016, HTS stormed the facilities of Radio Fresh in Kafr Nabl and after that, confiscated its equipment, arrested its manager and erased its archives, all under the pretext that it had been broadcasting "immoral" programmes with female announcers and music. (The station responded by playing animal sounds and disguising the voices of women news readers). When in November 2018, its founder, Raed Fares, was shot dead, journalists and observers suspected HTS was behind the attack. In January 2017 HTS confiscated for some time an issue of pro-opposition Enab Baladi magazine, preventing its distribution, due to an opinion article criticising the Jabhat al-Nusra. Moreover, scholar Haid Haid notes that by using their social media channels on Telegram, Facebook and WhatsApp groups, HTS (and its affiliated Iba' network) has systematically tried to undermine the credibility of Orient TV and the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR).

### ***Kurdish-majority zones***

Legal conditions are somewhat more permissive in Syrian Kurdistan, which in 2014 formally declared local autonomy and established its own constitution. Art 24, in particular, states "the right to freedom of opinion and expression." However, the same article also specifies that such freedoms may be curtailed to ensure the "security of the autonomous regions, public safety and order, the integrity of the individual" and other interests, seemingly opening the door to restrictive laws on issues like sedition and defamation. According to a report by Freedom House, a US-based NGO that conducts research and advocacy on democracy, political freedom and human rights, in August 2015, PYD officials withdraw the operating licenses of the Erbil-based Rudaw Media Network, associated with the KDP and Orient TV, the outlet owned by an exiled Syrian tycoon who opposes Assad, accusing both of inciting violence and spreading false news. The current press law dates back to December 2015 and establishes criteria for obtaining media licenses and accreditation for journalists. It also institutes a press council whose aim is to monitor media reporting and identify law violations, which can result in fines and temporary or permanent revocation of licenses.

## **Accountability systems**

Due to the strong control the state has exerted on the media for decades, even once the media market was opened to private

investors in 2001, media accountability institutions like press councils were simply not necessary and therefore do not exist in Syria. The only professional organisation, the Union of Journalists (see above), does not protect its affiliates but operates as a body of the government. Also, since all news outlets have to provide more or less the same version of the facts, ethical norms or a code to regulate individual or organisation decisions are superfluous. Although these same conditions still persist in the traditional media, new media outlets, emerging even before the beginning of the unrest, have contributed to raise awareness on media accountability practices. In fact, as Pies and Madanat have highlighted in their 2011 report, by giving the readers the possibility to comment online, news websites have introduced an “audience-oriented journalism approach” which takes the audience into account. Thus they have contributed to holding the media accountable for aspects the old media does not cover and the audience seems to have entered the field. This is even truer after the proliferation of new media outlets with the 2011 unrest and the evolution and the constant changes that have since affected the sector. In September 2015, over twenty independent Syrian media outlets agreed on ethical guidelines for their work and developed the Charter of Honour, an ethical charter for Syrian media to which the signatories chose to adhere. The charter includes not only print media but also online news outlets and radio stations and aims to guarantee “freedom of expression through professional and ethical journalism.” There are still some elements of disagreement, most importantly the complaints and enforcement mechanisms. The charter is open for any organisation to join and aims to become a recognised sign of quality/professionalism for the member organisations.

## **Regulatory authorities**

On August 2011, President Bashar al-Asad approved a new media law, which establishes a National Media Council (NMC). This is linked to the cabinet and regulates the information sector under the new law. Among other duties, the NMC sets conditions for licenses, issues them to private media outlets and specifies rules on funding. However, the NMC lacks independence, effectively serving as a mouthpiece for the government’s media policy and a vehicle for state propaganda. Although the law requires authorities to consult the NMC before detaining or arresting journalists, searching or seizing their equipment, or investigating their activities, this process is a mere formality. The NMC is the sole entity authorised to issue media credentials to journalists and - according to the mentioned report by Freedom House - in March 2014 it began to crack down on outlets that provided press cards and other professional identification to journalists without going through official channels. The NMC maintains a stringent registration and licensing regime and closely monitors outlets to ensure compliance. The NMC also regularly criticises media coverage displeasing to the government and works to intimidate outlets into taking a pro-government editorial line. For example - as Freedom House reports - in September 2016, the NMC criticised outlets for using allegedly sympathetic language to describe armed opposition groups and insisted that they instead refer to such groups as “terrorists.” According to Reporter Without Borders, since 2018, reputedly pro-government Syrian journalists have been charged or threatened by the intelligence services in connection with what they reported. The most emblematic of these cases is that of Wissam al-Tayr, the famous editor of the very influential pro-government page Damascus Now, who was arrested in December 2018. Some sources say he made the mistake of posting a poll about the fuel crisis in Syria. He was released after nine months thanks to a presidential amnesty. Journalists working for pro-government media outlets sometimes have used their privileged position and their connections to raise awareness of matters such as poor living standards or corruption. However, as Sabrina Bennoui, the head of RSF’s Middle East desk says in reference to the recent arrest of yet another journalist “corruption and the economic crisis are kept off limits for Syria’s journalists although they are a real concern for the population in this war-torn country.” On 15 August 2014, the Kurdish Supreme Committee, the governing body in the Kurdish majority areas of Syria, established the Yekîtiya Ragihandina Azad (Union of Free Media - YRA). The YRA, based in Qamishli, is an official body with numerous press-related functions. Subsequently, when the High Council for Media was established, it took over the authority to grant license for media organisations and journalists that want to work in Rojava. Therefore, all news media in the Kurdish cantons must request and obtain permits from the council in order to be

able to operate in the area. Some reports suggest that the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the dominant Kurdish political party in Rojava, exercises undue influence over the two bodies to monitor and control independent media. Moreover, temporary or permanent suspensions of licenses are often used to exert control over journalists. For example, as reported by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), in May 2020 the authorities suspended Rudaw reporter Vivian Fatah's press credentials for two months, thereby banning her from working as a journalist during that time, because she used the word "killed" rather than "martyred" when referring to fallen members of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. According to Reporters Without Borders, the PYD and its henchmen have no qualms about arresting or even abducting news and information providers whom they see as too critical, in order to silence them and intimidate the others. Also, many news providers report that they must keep the security forces (Asayish) informed of their movements. The authorities argue that such authorisation is necessary for the journalists' safety. Nevertheless, a variety of print and broadcast outlets are generally allowed to operate, including those that are critical of the ruling party.

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## Education

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### Universities and schools

Since there are no real independent media institutions in the country, there is scarce availability of tools and experience in this sector. Public universities and private institutes do exist, but have little room of manoeuvre in particular regarding political issues. Specifically, the media professionalisation environment suffers from an increasingly polarised context where the ideological and political affiliation could count much more than any proven technical skill. As a matter of fact, on the National Media Council (NMC) website the page devoted to "Practice and preparation" and the one entitled "History of the Syrian press" are both empty of contents. In 2016, only five years after its creation in 2011, the NMC was absorbed by the Ministry of Information in the context of the "government reforms" promoted in the aftermath of the first popular protests. As many other state institutions, the NMC was considered an empty box with no effective power and role in the media environment. The Syrian Ministry of Information established the *Ma'had al-i'dad al-i'lam* (Media Preparation Institute) in 1969. In 1985 the Education Ministry opened a Media Department at the University of Damascus, now the Faculty of Media. According to the page on the official website of the university, the faculty organises and holds courses, workshops and training programmes for students, but also training and refresher courses for people already working in media institutions. Nowadays, there are

also other media courses available at the university of Latakia. Media classes at the public universities of Damascus and Latakia are known for lack of equipment and facilities, in particular TV cameras and TV and radio studios. Due to the increasing demand, some private institutes started to organise short-term media courses in Damascus. Popular anchorpeople and journalists of public and private pro-government TVs lecture in some of these courses that are also recognised by the Information Ministry. In some cases, students of these courses have the chance to contribute to pro-government media outlets during the training period. For instance, in 2014 the Mass Communication and Training Institute in Damascus started a 15-day “war correspondent training media course” aimed at “developing media work in the face of the global terrorist war waged against Syria.” The following year, the Media Preparation Institute organised a “training course in talk-show and television and radio presentation” focused on “investigative journalism, body language, TV appearance, journalistic and social media reporting, in addition to issues related to war correspondents and political analysts.”

In the post-2011 context, many media activists and aspiring Syrian journalists had the chance to attend workshops and media courses organised inside and outside the country by dozens of Western INGOs specialised in the media development sector and funded by the EU, single European countries and the US. These training efforts reached their peak between 2013 and 2014. During this time, most of the workshops have been organised outside Syria, mainly in Southern Turkey (Gaziantep) as well as in Lebanon and Jordan. The main targets of these trainings were Syrian media activists coming from areas that were no longer under governmental control. In some cases, local media outlets close to the opposition political agenda emerged out of these experiences; whilst in other cases, local media centres (as the Syrian Press Centre in North-Western Syria) have been created in order to boost the training opportunities inside the war-torn opposition-held areas. Actually, some aspiring Syrian journalists have benefited from field experience, mainly as photo-reporters and cameramen along the frontlines. As many of them feel they have overcome the initial condition of ‘activists’, they express the need of more advanced trainings.

## **Professional development**

In most of the state-owned media, journalists are government employees who fear losing their jobs at any point and they do not earn enough to support their family. “Almost all journalists take on a second job, such as driving a taxi. Most state journalists work for private media outlets as well, although this is prohibited technically. Often paid by the story, journalists in the public sector will sacrifice quality in order to turn out as many articles as possible” (Media Sustainability Index). According to the law governing membership of the aforementioned Union of Journalists (SJU) “nobody can practise journalism unless he is registered in the general list of syndicate members” (Art11). Those wishing to register as “working” journalists have to undergo the necessary training and not to “practice any other profession” (Art 13). For recent high-school graduates the period of training lasts four years, three years for university graduates with no less than two years of media studies and six years for people with neither. The same article prohibits journalist apprentices from practising another profession. During the training period, the trainee is obliged to work in a media institution accepted by the SJU executive bureau. The training institutions are all state-run. Each year annual reports detailing the progress of the training have to be presented and the apprentice must pass a test defined by the registration committee, which eventually takes the decision to confer “working” status or extend the training period to six additional months. This gives the state another opportunity to prevent those with critical voices from becoming journalists. Only after finishing the required training period, training journalists are accepted as “working” members. All journalists, then, both Syrian and foreign, are required by law to carry their journalist’s IDs. The ID is issued by the General Administration for News and Publicity. It must bear the name of the publication or agency for which the journalist works and is only valid for the year in which it is issued.

Despite the fact that the government has retaken almost all the areas lost in the first three years of the revolt, it should be noted that the development of emerging Syrian media over the past years has been characterised by an increasing structuration and institutionalisation. As mentioned before, this process has been often supported by international partners

working in the field of media development. Generally speaking, these emerging media still have to struggle with scarcity of expertise both at administrative and journalistic level. There is still suspicion on the part of the founders of media outlets in sharing power and responsibilities with other people, because they are afraid to lose control on the institution. As far as content producing is regarded, the quality has been developing over the past years, overcoming the original phase of the activism and moving towards a more professionalised journalism practice. More emphasis is being put in fact in cross-checking the sources and on the autonomy of reporters. However, most media outlets have problems in retaining their trained staff (due to migration and/or search for more stable and more remunerative employment opportunities) and this remains one of the main problems for a higher professionalisation. The recently formulated ethical charter (see above) represents an important step also in this direction, despite its lack of enforcement mechanisms.

## **Media Development Organisations**

Starting from 2012, several financial and intellectual resources were put in place by donors and foreign organisations to support the development of independent and free media in the post-2011 Syria. Until 2014, this trend was part of the political attempt to support the wave of opposition to the government of president Bashar al-Asad. Therefore, dozens of media outlets were born, with different ambitions and registers, but almost all in line with the political ideas and agenda of the opposition. These media mainly tried to cover areas outside government's control, including the de facto Kurdish-controlled areas on the Eastern side of the Euphrates River. From a mere quantitative point of view, among the Syrian post-2011 media, those emerged in the Kurdish-held areas have survived more than the media outlets appeared in the opposition-held areas (for example, Ronahi TV, Welat Radio, Arta FM Radio). This is mainly due to the fact that since 2013 these territories have been gradually conquered by governmental forces. When in 2014-2015 the dynamics of the conflict in Syria changed (also due to, but not only, the rise of the Islamic State, the direct Russian military intervention, and the crisis of migrants in Europe), donors, cooperation agencies and media development NGOs began to reconsider their strategies and approaches. Most of them reduced their aid, or diverted their support to less politically explicit initiatives.

Therefore, the majority of the media set up between 2012 and 2014 have not survived, due to their financial unsustainability in the medium and long run. Only few of them have succeeded, having attracted new funds also from private sources, and/or implemented financially sustainable work practices. There is no doubt that the media development ecosystem has contributed to the birth, growth and affirmation of a kind of journalism that aspires to freedom of expression and thought and favours the creation of spaces for a civil and democratic life.

However, two factors have delayed and somehow also undermined its healthy and natural development. Firstly, the lack of coherence in the long term. In fact, supporting new independent media outlets was part of a wider political strategy and not as a principle per se, therefore, once the situation on the ground changed in favour of the government and its allies, donors have not searched for new ways and approaches to support media activists, and journalists fled abroad, or found themselves living in areas gradually fallen under government control. Secondly, the lack of a more comprehensive financial strategy that would disengage media outlets from the non-sustainable assistance of international organisations and NGOs and seek ways and strategies to make profits.

Nowadays, there are still several international media development organisations working in Syria and/or in the neighbouring countries. One of them is the Journalists for Human Rights (JHR), which is Canada's leading media development organisation that has a project, based in Turkey, to help Syrian journalists enhance their skills and strengths and ensure the sustainability of a selected number of independent Syrian media outlets, by expanding their audience share and revenue base.

Media in Cooperation and Transition (MiCT) is a German non-profit organisation that implements media development

projects in crisis regions. It started working in Syria in 2012 to support independent citizen media that do not encourage violent means or ethnic or sectarian discrimination.

Free Press Unlimited (FPU) is a foundation based in Amsterdam, which, since 2014 has organised round tables for Syrian journalists of different ethnicities, political affiliations, and backgrounds. If it is not easy to quantitatively assess the scope of these discussions, in the long run, such debates and meetings have contributed to spread a certain awareness and responsibility among citizen journalists and media activists towards inclusivity, respect of basic rights, and against discrimination behaviours based on race, ethnicity, sect, or gender.

In terms of synergies, the INGOs operating in the media development ecosystem have tried to support the creation of shared platforms among Syrian NGOs and media entities. These efforts have positively stimulated discussions among Syrians inside and outside the country, as observed by one of the authors' participation in several media development workshops held outside Syria between 2014 and 2016; in addition to that, the author has collected several impressions discussing directly with INGO staff and Syrian media activists operating inside and outside Syria. International Media Support (IMS) is a non-profit organisation based in Denmark, which, among other projects, supports Radio Rozana (launched from Paris in 2013) and The Syrian Observer (an online news service dedicated primarily to translating into English news content produced by Syria's press).

The Syrian Female Journalists Network (SFJN) is an organisation based in the Netherland, which has been carrying out projects in Syria and in the neighbouring countries to enhance female voices in the media field, to encourage female journalists to take over leading positions in their institutions, and to raise social awareness concerning gender equality and women's issues in the media. In 2019 SFJN launched Qalat (that means "she said" in Arabic), a database of Syrian female experts in various fields to promote the skills and expertise of Syrian women in Syrian and international media, and break the male monopoly over sources of information and analysis in the media.

Most of the aforementioned organisations worked or still work in areas formerly controlled by the opposition. The geography of the conflict has radically changed after 2018 and 2019 and is still evolving; with the exception of Idlib and the north Aleppo countryside, there are no other opposition-held areas. Despite formal control of the government, even the areas under its authority are in fact not controlled by the regime as before 2011. In all the areas (be they under the control of the opposition, the government or the Kurds) there are informal networks of journalists working under cover, under the radar, or operating in a relatively open environment. It is more difficult to find structured and registered organisations for journalists, as the current respective authorities (i.e. Turks, Kurds, Government and its allies) tend to impose restrictions on media freedom. In recent years, dozens of media development organisations and journalism NGOs reunited in the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), an international network of journalism support organisations.

Overall, journalism in Syria is certainly in a better state than prior to 2011. In every area, new room for politics and rights has opened up, if compared to the pre-conflict situation. This relative improvement is certainly unsatisfactory by international standards. However, an evolution has occurred on the level of awareness, use of technologies, professionalization and ethical consciousness.

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Media development organisations

? [Free Press Unlimited](#) (FPU)

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? [Radio Rozana](#)

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# Telecommunications

## Mobile network ecosystem

Based on the Speedtest provided by the American web service Ookla, the average speed of Internet mobile connection is 22.07 Mbp (April 2020), ranking 83rd in the global index and recording a slight improvement in the speed. The crisis in Syria continues to impact the reliability of telecommunication services in the country. Blackouts to Internet and telephony services are not uncommon and mobile network coverage has been impacted due to extensive damage to the telecommunication infrastructure as a result of the war, although improvements have taken place during 2018 and in recent years some 4G LTE infrastructures have been deployed. Overall, Damascus has good coverage, but services in other locations are far more limited (also in important urban locations, such as Aleppo, Qamishli and Homs). In addition to damaged infrastructure as a consequence of the conflict, regular power outages occur, which impact the entire communication network in Syria at various degrees, depending on the areas. Remote areas usually rely heavily on expensive satellite communications. In fact, in the remaining opposition pocket of Greater Idlib (including few districts of Hama, Latakia and Idlib), power shortages are more frequent than elsewhere. Also in eastern Syria under the de facto Kurdish control, the countryside often experiences more shortages than the few urban contexts, in terms of basic services, including Internet and electricity. However, these structural problems also affect depressed and marginalised areas in governmental Syria.

Electricity mains belonging to the Syrian governmental grid are usually run on a schedule of on/off hours. As a result of this instability, some people and most of the UN hubs and offices rely on petrol generators to maintain a continuous power supply. However, due to the recent plummet in the value of Syrian pound against the US dollar and the consequent increase in prices of basics such as fuel, also hours of electricity from private generators have been reduced. The global aid network

Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) has been operating in Syria since 2013 to provide security telecommunications and Internet connectivity services and related trainings to the humanitarian community responding to the crisis.

Only in late 2018, ETC received permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior to import certain security telecommunications equipment, which has enabled the ETC to improve the telecommunications infrastructure in the country. Currently it has sites in and around Syria (Aleppo, Qamishli, Dayr al-Zawr Tartus, Homs, Hama, Damascus and in the neighbouring countries: Beirut, Amman, Ankara, Antakya, Kilis, Gaziantep, Sanliurfa) and three new humanitarian hubs are planned in Tabqa, Suwayda, Dar'a and Raqqa.

## Company profiles

In 2020 what appears to be a reorganisation of the corporate and political architecture of the mobile and Internet landscape has been occurring, with the purge of Makhluף from Syriatel and the change at the top of MTN.

Syria introduced mobile phone services only in 2000, when the government licensed two private companies to supply the services: Syriatel and Areeba. Areeba was owned by the Lebanese Mikati family, which later merged with the large South African Group MTN (and the Mikati family kept holding a share in the newly established group). At the time, the closeness between the Mikati family and Bashar al-Asad was not well known, but recent leaks have shown a strong personal relation between members of the two families, although there are no obvious formal capitalistic links to confirm such a relation between the president himself and MTN-Syria. The other operator, Syriatel is the leading company of the sector, currently holding 71 percent of the market (based on the latest data posted by the two mobile phone companies and mentioned by the The Syria Report), and is owned by businessman Rami Makhluף the maternal cousin of president Bashar al-Asad and one of the most powerful men of the country.

Until 2014, both companies were operating under Build-Own-Transfer (BOT) contracts and each one had to pay 60 percent of their revenues to the State. On 31 December, 2014, the BOT contracts were replaced by new 20-year licenses which have generated huge losses for the Syrian State in the following years, while increasing the profits of the two operators. The share of revenues that the Government collects now is much lower than its share under the BOT contracts (20 percent), although it still receives a significant amount of money.

At the beginning of 2020, Syriatel and MTN-Syria have announced an increase in their revenues for 2019. Based on the data published by The Syria Report, Syriatel posted a year-on-year revenue growth of 20.33 percent to SYP221bn (around US\$242m at the end-of-year black market exchange rate); while MTN-Syria posted a more modest increase of 19 percent to SYP90bn (US\$98.5m). The significant revenues steadily generated by the two companies can be due to the extensive use of mobile phone calls and data services by a largely displaced population that cannot always rely on the severely damaged landline network. Moreover, the two companies have profited from continued repairs to their network and from the return of various parts of the country – such as Aleppo and Dayr al-Zawr – under the control of government forces. According to The Syria Report, Syriatel has steadily gained market shares since 2011 to the detriment of its competitor. Its current share surge is also due to the fact that it has been able to access and repair the destroyed segments of its network much faster than MTN. “The fact that several armed militias are funded by Rami Makhluף, the company’s main shareholder, reportedly helped the company in its efforts” the website specialised in economic news and analysis states. The two government-controlled companies cover almost the entire geography of Syria.

In April 2020, the Ministry of Communication and Technology claimed a combined SYP233.8bn from the two companies as an adjustment of the original license award. In addition to this amount, the Ministry of Finance has also accused both

companies of tax evasion. According to analysts, the pressure piled up on Syriatel and MTN-Syria goes beyond a tax issue, but it is a signal from the government to both Rami Makhlef, Bashar al-Asad's maternal cousin, and Najib Mikati, former Lebanese Prime Minister, that their time has passed. In May 2020, several members of MTN's board resigned suggesting a possible change in sight in the capital structure of the company. On the other hand, in June 2020, a Syrian court granted judicial custody of Syriatel to the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment, the state-owned operator of landline network. As stated by The Syria Report, "The court's decision was complemented by an order from the State Council to the competent authorities—in this case meaning the security services—to enforce the decision, even by force if required." Therefore, Rami Makhlef, the most influential businessman in Syria for the twenty years of Bashar al-Asad's rule, has lost control of the management of Syriatel, although he still remains so far the company's majority shareholder.

Along border zones, Syrian users can also rely respectively on Turkish, Iraqi, Lebanese and Jordanian operators. According to an interview collected in the 2019 Freedom on the Net report by Freedom House, the monthly fees for a 1 Mbps Internet connection were approximately \$10 in rebel-controlled areas of northern Syria. Turkish companies have installed telecom transmitters and reverberators close and inside the northwestern part of Syria, an area de facto dominated by Turkish forces (see paragraph Mobile coverage).

In early 2017, in the frame of the signing of five economic agreements between Syria and Iran, the Syrian government signed a preliminary contract for a third license with the Mobile Telecommunication Company of Iran (MCI), affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). However, since then no new information has been released and it appears that the award of a new license has been temporarily postponed.

## **Main trends**

No data is available on the use of apps in the country. However, observation and anecdotal evidence from local sources inside and outside Syria, suggest a steady use of social/instant messaging apps, such as Facebook, Messenger, Whatsapp and Telegram, with Whatsapp seeming by large the most used app, followed by Messenger. Frequently, different kinds of information (i.e. latest news, currency rates etc) circulate on informal closed Whatsapp/Messenger/Telegram groups rather than through specific apps. Even if there are several other apps that have met the needs for crucial information services and daily necessities (Makani , for instance, is a mapping mobile app that allows searching for business, services, and commercial activities, specially designed for Syria; money-transfer apps inspired to hawwala practice, such as: Hawale, DagDag, Revolut; Liveuamap, Syria: Real Time War) Syrians generally use Whatsapp/Messenger/ Telegram groups to obtain these services and information .

On another level, Gherbtna is an app designed to help Syrians newly arrived in Turkey to navigate this new and unfamiliar territory. It was launched in early 2014 and designed by Mujahid 'Aqil, a computer programmer who is himself a Syrian refugee. The app offers newly arrived refugees help in bureaucratic procedures, job/housing opportunities, but also advice on health, education and other legal services.

Mujahid 'Aqil launched another app in 2016, Tarjemly Live (Translate for me, in Arabic), available only in Turkey, which puts a live human translator on the other end of the phone, translating Turkish, Arabic, and English orally, or by text messages for a small fee. In December 2018, Atif Javed, who comes from a refugee family, and Aziz Alghunaim launched Tarjimly, an app addressing migrants (or people working with them) all around the world that need a translator or interpreter: the app searches in its database the best available volunteer with the requested language skills. Many Syrian children refugees who attend school face difficulties in learning, because they have endured long-term stress, or because they are being taught in a language they do not master. The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) has taken the initiative to develop two apps that can help Syrian children learn to read while playing: Feed the Monster and Antura and the Letters.

At the end of 2019, the Syrian Council of Ministers announced that it would adopt the use of the electronic payment system in the first quarter of 2020, so that Syrians would be able to pay utility and telephone bills, traffic tickets, and taxes over the Internet through mobile apps. The state-owned Syrian Electronic Payments Company in coordination with the relevant ministries and the Syrian Central Bank is the body in charge of implementing the system. However, according to sources in the country, in mid-2020 some services were active only through a few private banks in Damascus and its surroundings and the entire project was postponed to 2021.

## Mobile coverage

Because of the war, Syria's telecommunications infrastructure is damaged and highly decentralised, even if the situation has improved in 2018. Shelling and sabotage have led to its damage, which has affected the Internet and power connections in several provinces (the most affected are: Idlib, Aleppo, Dayr al-Zawr, Raqqa, Dar'a, Quneitra, formerly under opposition groups or under IS control). People living near the Northern border often rely on Turkish mobile Internet beamed in from across the border, or on expensive satellite connections (VSAT), which are prohibited, although in reality they are heavily employed due to the damage of the telecom infrastructure. Authorities regularly shut down Internet access to prevent the dissemination of information, particularly before and during military operations. In recent years, the opposition oriented SMART News Agency has reported interruptions of Internet services also in northern Syria under orders from Turkish authorities during their military operation in the Afrin region in January 2018 and in February of the same year in Idlib Governorate, where the cut-off was ordered by HTS in response to a protest movement against its presence in the city of Idlib.

Turkey is gradually expanding its reach and influence all along the northern border and in the contested areas of Idlib and the northern Aleppo countryside. Historically, Syrians and Turks in the border region have long been closely linked. Geographically, this area is generally flat, so signals from Turkish phone operators have always been accessible in Syria. However, with the enduring conflict and the deterioration of infrastructures, the citizens of the Aleppo countryside have started depending mainly on the Turkish networks, which cover areas within the Syrian border, most notably Turkcell, Avea and Vodafone. In July 2018, according to Enab Baladi, an opposition media organisation, the Turkish telecommunication company Türk Telekom, has opened its first customer service centre in the town of A'zaz, North of Aleppo. It has also established offices for the Turkish postal services there, along with several other services and infrastructures. Enab Baladi's correspondent in the Aleppo countryside has described that the cell towers placed in al-Bab and A'zaz, both located North of Aleppo, were reinforced with 4.5G Internet.

In June 2018, the UK-based al-Marsad al-suri li-huquq al-insan (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights), reported that Turkcell started to install a mobile communications tower in the Idlib countryside, following the completion of the Turkish military's observation posts running from Aleppo to Hama. On the phone tower there is a sign saying: "This tower was installed to provide network coverage for the Turkish forces who are distributed at several observation posts in the countryside of Idlib, Hama and in the countryside of Aleppo." In January 2019, SMART News Agency reported that the Swedish company R-Cell

brought 4G technology in northeast Syria via optical cable from the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The authorities of the Kurdish-held areas of Syria, have issued a statement that has prohibited the use of Turkish Internet lines since 1 April 2019.

## Mobile ownership

According to the Kepios Digital 2020 report, the percentage of mobile connections is 83 percent in 2020, with an increase of 4.3 percent over the previous year and a total 14.31 million mobile connections. Previous data from International Telecommunication Union (ITU) show that the percentage of mobile phone subscribers has steadily and constantly increased since the introduction of mobile phone services in 2000, with some exceptions probably related to fluctuations in the population size coinciding with intensifying levels of the conflict in the country.

Overall, while mobile phones are used almost universally, there are disparities and complexities: People in rural areas are less likely to have access to connectivity and limited access to Internet-enabled phones. Moreover, the level of tech literacy may differ a lot. Observation suggests that mobile phones are mostly and predominantly used to stay in touch with family members and acquaintances, and collect information and be updated to news on the current events.

However, at different degrees, mobiles are also used for entertainment (listening to music and watching videos on YouTube, but also playing video games and quizzes) to escape from work- family- and war-related issues. An ICT4Refugees research of 2016 found that these platforms are so dominant that many refugees do not use websites or even know how the Internet works. They found email is rarely used and “smartphones are not typically regarded as a portal through which one can independently search for information [...] rather information flows are overwhelmingly peer-to-peer.” (p 11)

Since 2011, the Ministry of Telecommunications has significantly and regularly increased mobile phone rates, a measure that has benefited the two mobile phone companies, Syriatel and MTN, owned by well-connected entrepreneurs. The latest such increase, was decided in June 2016. Data communications through the 3G network cost SYP11 per megabyte, but due to the sharp devaluation of the Syrian pound, prices are no longer descriptive.

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## Innovation

### Landscape analysis

Even before the outbreak of the current conflict, the Syrian system of innovation could be considered at a primary stage. Innovation capacities were very little and companies preceded by imitation. A prolonged era of protectionism and closed markets has nurtured the development of a conservative entrepreneur class and the growth of uncompetitive companies.

Moreover, bureaucracy has been obstructing individuals from investment and innovation. This ecosystem has worsened in the latest years, due to insecurity and political instability, collapsing infrastructures, scarcity of funds, sanctions and therefore payment restrictions, besides the diminishing market size and human capital, often forced to migrate and leave its cities.

A very weak area of the Syrian innovation system is the technology and research sector, with the existing technical centres not able to propose suitable research and development. The governance body for research activities in Syria is *al-Hay'a al-'ulya li-l-bahth al-'ilmi* (Higher Commission for Scientific Research - HCSR) established in 2005 to perform an advisory role to the government on science- technology- and innovation-related issues. It is an inter-ministerial board reporting to the Prime Minister and aims at formulating the national policy for scientific research and technological development, and coordinating between scientific research bodies. Moreover, it distributes funds for scientific research organisations in accordance with their role and performance.

## **Profiles of main tech parks, accelerators, hackathons**

The Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Centre (SSRC) was established in 1971, following a presidential directive of 1969 with the overt goals to promote and coordinate scientific activities in the country, particularly those related to education, research and development, and to work on projects needed for the economic and social development of the country, notably on the computerisation of governmental enterprises and institutions.

In 1973, Syrian late president Hafez al-Asad issued a new directive, officially authorising relations between the SSRC and the Syrian army. Analysts believe the SSRC is responsible for research and development of nuclear, biological, chemical, and missile-related technology and since 2005 has been included in the sanction list of the US Treasury Department. The US Government has imposed sanctions also on other research institutes considered subordinates of the SSRC: *al-Ma'had al-'ali li-l-'ulum al-tatbiqiyya wa'l-taknulujiyya* (Higher Institute for Applied Sciences and Technology - HIAST), because it provides training to engineers affiliated with the SSRC; and Syria's Electronics Institute, as it is "responsible for missile-related research and development."

In 1989, at the initiative of Basil al-Asad, brother of the current president, who died in a car accident, *al-Jam'iyya al-'ilmiyya al-suriyya li-l-ma'lumatiyya* (Syrian Computer Society - SCS) was founded. The SCS aims to spread IT culture in Syrian society, and assist in the promotion and organisation of the information and communications technology market in the country. SCS has established a number of ICT incubators in the country, to foster and promote the development of new ICT enterprises.

According to the 2012 report by Madar Research and Development Centre on Arab ICT Use and Social Network Adoption, Syria had witnessed a dramatic growth in international Internet bandwidth shortly before the political turmoil, with growth rates registering a sky-high 184 percent compared to the previous year and the ICT infrastructures steadily improving (Internet penetration was at 23.92 percent and computer penetration was modest at 7.23 percent, whilst based on data of Internet world stats, in December 2019 there were more than 7.6 million Internet users in Syria, with a penetration of 43.5 percent of the population. The Speedtest provided by the American web service Ookla reveals that the average speed of fixed Internet connection is 7.31 Mbp (April 2020).

According to UNESCO website, there is a Science and Technology Park in Syria. The only site that could be found online is the *Hadiqat taknulujiyya al-ma'lumat* "IT Plaza", which was established in 2008, as a result of the cooperation between the Ministry of Communication and the South Korean International Cooperation Agency to spread technology among young people. It is located in Western Mezze, but no official website is currently available. However, judging from the information that could be found online it seems a place with modest capacities and resources. On the HCSR's official website the construction project of a Technological Pole (managed by the Damascus University) dated July 2007 is mentioned, but there

is no mention of any progress in the implementation of this project.

In January 2020, the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology announced on its website that Iran will contribute to establish a joint Science and Technology Park to facilitate the exchange of capabilities with Syrian universities and research institutions.

The 6th Syrian exhibition of information technology Syria Tech planned for June 2020 was cancelled probably because of the COVID19 outbreak and postponed to June 2021. The exhibition includes IT companies and young teams specialised in the technology field.

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# Traditional forms of communication

## Summary

Syria has its own legendary singer/actor and 'ud player Farid al-Atrash (1915-1974). He is referred to as "the king of 'ud" and widely followed and imitated. In more recent times, singer Lena Chamamyán of Armenian origin, with her mixture of Syrian and Armenian music with Western influence is also an acclaimed star, who has drawn attention also from foreign media. Before the war, every year in June, the Jazz Lives in Syria Festival was held both in Damascus and Aleppo, but the last edition mentioned in its official website dates back to 2010.

The Ministry of Culture controls several theatre venues in Damascus and in other cities. Among these, the Damascus Opera House, Dar al-Asad li-l-funnun wa'l-thaqafa (al-Asad House for Arts and Culture), which has remained open despite the war, even after being badly damaged by a mortar attack in April 2014. Attendance even briefly swelled to pre-war numbers in the December following the attack, according to Agence France Presse. In general, theatre in Syria is a state-controlled activity: Not only due to the funding mechanism, but also because scripts are submitted to the Ministry of Culture for approval and censors attend rehearsals. Therefore, self-censorship is very common and prompted. However, over the years the best Syrian directors and playwrights have engaged forbidden topics and critiqued the government's use of surveillance and torture, sometimes employing paradox and surrealism, all too often risking to be imprisoned, excluded from the scenes and/or suffer from reprisal.

Today, not surprisingly, the majority of the country's best-known theatre directors and writers work outside of their homeland. Some of them, like 'Umar Abu Sa'da, Muhammad al-'Attar and Nawar Bulbul, have created therapeutic theatre pièces with refugees (in January 2018 the former two have completed their theatrical trilogy, dedicated to the lives of women seeking refuge from war: Trojan Women in 2013, Antigone of Shatila in 2014 and Iphigenia in Germany; the latter has been working with children in the Za'tari refugee camp in Jordan to stage Shakespeare's plays). However, there are still some artists who continue to live and perform in Syria, as it is the case of Usama Ghanam, theatre director, dramaturg and translator, who is the founder and technical director of a unique initiative, the Damascus Theatre Laboratory, an independent art circle for

theatre based in Damascus. Since 2011, he has been running long-term training programs for young Syrian playwrights. His latest play, *Drama*, a free adaptation of Sam Shepard's "True West" set in Damascus, spreads the message that the city persists in living despite the unstoppable fight.

As far as the national cinema scene is concerned, in 1963, with the rise to power of Ba'th Party, al-Mu'assasa al-'amma li-l-sinama (National Film Organisation – NFO) was created. Over the years NFO has been almost the only film producer in Syria, the distributor of foreign films in the country and of Syrian films abroad. "A lot of films of the NFO, after the script was approved and everything was completed, were banned. Other films disappeared immediately for a certain period, and then returned to circulation. Sometimes, first they were forbidden and then allowed. Other times their commercial diffusion was forbidden but their screening in festivals, in Syria or abroad was permitted." (Nicosia, 2007) In 1979, the Mihrajan Dimashq al-sinama'i al-duwali (Damascus International Film Festival) was launched, which was held every two years until November 2010. Due to the tight control of censorship, directors and screenwriters have been often forced to use complex symbolism or to take refuge in historical themes. Among Syrian most famous directors who have gained also international fame, it is worth mentioning: 'Abd al-Latif 'Abd al-Hamid, Samir Dhikra, Muhammad Malas, Usama Muhammad, Nabil al-Malih etc. With the beginning of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, filmmaking and all other forms of artistic expression underwent deep changes.

Videos became particularly important as activist tools and works in a variety of media began to appear online. The majority of the videos that have been produced amidst the current conflict have been driven more by the wish to document a particular moment or situation than by aesthetic pursuits. However, many works stand out and some movies have gained international attention and received prizes all over the world. Among the latest: *Akhir al-rijal fi Halab* (Last Men in Aleppo, 2017), by Firas Fayyad, which earned critical acclaim and numerous awards and nominations, including the 2018 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature; or *Yom Adaatou Zouli* (The Day I Lost My Shadow, 2018), by Soudade Kaadan, which won the 2018 "Lion of the Future", the Venice Film Festival award for a debut film.

In the 2000s Syria witnessed an outpouring of musalsalat (TV series), intended for the national market but also for other Arab countries (mainly of the Gulf). The industry has not interrupted its production during the current conflict and has managed to produce an average of twenty serials per year since the uprising began. Serials are shot in Damascus or in neighbouring Lebanon under arduous wartime conditions; they air despite Gulf boycotts (Salamandra, 2016). Nowadays, Syrians have also access to Netflix and are exposed to a variety of foreign TV series that is inevitably impacting the internal market. If musalsalat have always tackled themes considered taboos, in recent years they have started to reflect also on the war and its causes. Scholar Christa Salamandra explains that "drama creators work to expose what they deem the pathologies of a flawed, regressing political and social evolution," citing as an example the 2018 series *al-Waq waq* (The Back of Beyond), where a group of Syrian people of various religious, class, regions, and ethnicities are shipwrecked on a deserted island. They resolve to create a democracy, but it devolves into dictatorship. The series reflects on politics, collective memory, history and the representation of the past. In April 2020, a Ramadan series, the detective drama *Muqabala ma'a al-sayyid Adam* (An Interview with Mr Adam) hit the headlines and was met with revulsion, because the picture of a 24-year-old woman, died when in custody of the government, was used to represent a fictional murdered woman. The photography used in the musalsal was the same through which the family of the young woman had discovered her death, one of the thousands released by a dissident military police photographer in 2014, in what came to be known as the Caesar report.

In an interview to the opposition website Enab Baladi, Syrian director Tha'ir Musa explains also the moves of the Syrian government in the cinema industry: "At the beginning [of the Syrian conflict] the interest of the regime turned to drama to convey its point of view and devote its narrative to the musalsalat, serving its policy. However, such musalsalat were rejected by pan-Arab channels that refrained from showing series dealing with the Syrian situation, whether they were from the side of the regime, or the opposition's. This pushed the regime towards cinema, which ensures it reaches international public opinion

and the largest segment of public through festivals featuring these films.” It is a fact that – judging from the information on its official websites – starting from 2018 the National Film Organisation has produced, co-produced, or funded more film projects than in the previous few years. These films present the official narrative of the Syrian government on the war and the destruction in the country, ascribing all the responsibility to terrorists and a foreign conspiracy. Some recent examples are: Dimashq-Halab (Damascus-Aleppo, by Basil Khatib, starring the famous actor Duraid Lahham), the story of a father’s journey between the two cities of the title, where the destruction of Aleppo is attributed to the “opposition”; Musafiru al-harb (War Travellers, by Jud Sa’id) narrates another journey of another father when the war is raging and the battle of Aleppo is at its peak; and Rajul al-thawra (Revolution Man, by Najdat Anjur) is the story of a foreign journalist that illegally enters Syria and witnesses a chemical massacre, which the film portrays as staged by “opposition groups”. Overall, also the film industry has benefitted from a more open attitude triggered by the 2011 revolution, even among the films produced by NFO. However, Palestinian-Syrian writer and critic Rashid Issa points out that “while traditional forms of censorship may have eased up a little, others have appeared.” Religious and sectarian issue have started becoming red lines. The example reported by Issa is related to the big controversy over director Najdat Anzour’s latest film Dam al-nakhil (Blood of Palm Trees) released in September 2019, which forced the filmmaker to suspend screenings, apologise and later remove the scene where the actor who plays the role of a coward soldier speaks with a Druze accent from Suwayda.

In 2020, two Syrian films Ila Sama (For Sama) by Waad al-Khatib and Edward Watts and al-Kahf (The Cave) by Firas Fayyad were nominated for the Oscars in the Best Documentary category (Firas Fayyad had previously received a nomination in 2018 for another documentary) and are now available for the international audience respectively on Netflix and Amazon Prime. In recent years, the growth of documentaries has sparked off intense debates among Syrians and foreign observers alike. For example, Syrian journalist Wassim al-Sharqi suggests in his article on the independent media platform Syria Untold that the film ‘An al-aba’ wa-l-abna’ (Of Fathers and Sons) by Talal Derki, which explores the life of a family of Islamist fanatics in Idlib, gained the 2019 Oscar nomination in the documentary section, thanks to the “adherence of (the director’s) orientation to the prioritization of anti-terrorism policy adopted by different US administrations... at the expense of pressuring the Syrian regime to realise a political change in the country”. More in general, many of the documentaries appeared in recent years are blamed for their complaisance to mainstream aesthetics and taste—which makes them more marketable—sometimes to the detriment of their “local” credibility, as scholar and media specialist Donatella Della Ratta explains in her review on world acclaimed Ila Sama, featured on Syria Untold.

In 2015, in the Kurdish-held northern region there was the first edition of the “Rojava Film Days”, which screened all-time classics from all around the region and the world in the main cities. The next year, it became “Rojava Film Festival” and in 2018 the festival took the name of Kobane International Film Festival (KIFF) and opened in the eponymous town. For every movie featured in the festival the organisers provide subtitles in Kurmanji to “support the effort of the Kurdish community to speak their own language” (as stated on the festival website). Moreover, the festival organises workshops and panels on cinema. Each year, the festival starts on the 13 of November to commemorate a fire that burned down a cinema of ‘Amuda (a town in the far north-east of the country) in November 1960, killing hundreds of children. The responsibilities for this tragic event are still controversial, and the central government of Damascus has always forbidden any public commemorations of the victims. In 2019 the name of the festival changed again in Rojava International Film Festival with a new website, which is less rich and detailed than the previous one. However, due to the October Turkish offensive into northeast Syria, it was not held and the organisers invited people all around the world to help the festival having its third edition by screening one or more of the selected films abroad. Promotion of Kurdish cultural production in the public space occurs also through the Rojava Theatre Festival, which until 2016 was called the Kurdish Theater Festival, and has changed its name, erasing the adjective “Kurdish” to respect cultural diversity; or the Festival of Arts and Literature organised by the Union of Intellectuals of Rojava – whose first edition was held in Germany in 2014. In addition to these, libraries and houses of culture and arts devoted to Kurdish heritage have been flourishing in recent years in the main cities of the northeastern region.

There are no major players among religious leaders who have an influence on a wide geographical environment: The majority are mosque preachers and Sunni religious figures, as well as priests and Christian authorities.

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- [Jazz Lives in Syria](#)
- [Kobane International Film Festival](#)
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## Conclusions

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### Conclusion

The current dynamic of the conflict in Syria suggests that in the mid and long term the government supported by Iran and Russia will continue gaining ground at the expenses of the Arab-armed opposition groups and Turkey will maintain its de facto protectorate in the north. The Kurds will likely be forced to reach an agreement with the Syrian government under Russian pressure regarding some areas from where the US forces have withdrawn (Raqqqa and Kobane), whilst remaining in the east and southeast where IS residual forces are still active. It’s quite likely that in the Kurdish-held areas, the space of media outlets will shrink, because the local authorities will probably take on a more rigid and less libertarian attitude. In recent years, independent media entities were forced to move their premises and local staff abroad: in neighbouring Turkey (the Lebanese, the Iraqi and the Jordanian contexts do not offer a comfortable working environment for opposition-driven media) or in Europe and North America.

If in the past the rhetoric of the ‘external threat’ was hegemonic and polarised narratives in producing media contents, the current economic crisis and the looming economic implosion with the subsequent worsening of the living standards of

ordinary citizens will monopolise the media discourse. Paradoxically, the widespread crisis equalises the conditions of the different areas of the country and could seem to bring the various 'Syrias' closer and therefore to overcome polarisation and fragmentation. In fact, it will probably lead to a progressive even bigger clusterization of narratives and practices, with all discourses limited to a narrow range of matters that directly affect each specific geographic micro-area. On the other hand, in the contested areas the relatively independent media activism atmosphere emerged in 2011 has had to come to terms with the scrutiny of HTS and Turkey that have proved restrictive (when not abusive) towards critical journalists and media outlets. However, the 2011 experience made many hope for a freer media landscape. The entire Syrian media system since the beginning of the uprising has been exposed to an unprecedented wave of requests for opening and updating. Nowadays and even under institutional control, local media in government-held areas are in any case compelled to behave in a more dynamic and competitive environment and have started to benefit from a slight loosening of the censorship control. The general landscape is characterised by the mushrooming of local and foreign sources reverberated through a continuous social media flow of information, in which the borderline between facts and opinion often blurs. Local and grass-roots media work in all areas of the country (including government-held zones) to expand the space of freedom of expression, starting from tackling supposedly minor social and political issues.

In this context local, national and regional political entities would continue to exert enormous pressure on emerging independent Syrian media inside and outside the country and this trend will hinder development and professionalisation of the media field. Regional powers and well-connected local tycoons have continued pouring huge funds in the sector in order to empower their respective political-biased media entities. While independent media - based abroad and with scarce turnover activity in their managerial and editorial structures - have received less and less financial support by European and American donors. Syria is probably heading towards an even worse time than the first decade of the current war. In the media sector, it is crucial to support the local development of media outlets founded by groups remained inside the country, with the necessary knowledge and experience to move in what has become a minefield.

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