

Syria - Media Landscape

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Overview

As the war in Syria entered in its seventh year in March 2017, the UN defined the conflict as the “the worst man-made disaster since World War II.” Despite efforts spent by various actors of the international community to reach a comprehensive

political agreement, in the mid-term the Syrian situation continues to be dominated overall by a prolonged status of intermittent violence. 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, Syria cannot be considered any longer a unitary context. 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, but - where possible - distinctions will be made. In the areas subjected to the Islamic State Organisation (IS) there is a media production, as well, which is undoubtedly mere propaganda (propaganda does exist also in other areas, though). Currently IS releases two online magazines - *Rumiyah* in several languages and *Konstantiniyye* in Turkish - to indoctrinate and recruit, with apparent tight (even if not official) links to Amaq News Agency. Nonetheless, here the IS context is only briefly mentioned because: a) it has a short history (starting only in 2014) and therefore it still represents a primitive case, without a proper regulatory framework; b) the polarised context in the areas under IS control intrudes so profoundly the media practice that the two main narratives involved (pro vs against IS, such as the US-funded *Raqqa is being slaughtered silently* organisation) offer contrasting, dualistic views, with the complete absence of grey areas; c) there are no chances for actors to professionalise.

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 oppressive 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 the world's most dangerous country for journalists. In fact, as the figures released by the Syrian Network for Human Rights state, 615 media activists were killed in the country from March 2011 until March 2017. Nevertheless, there has been a true explosion of "independent media" after 2011. 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.

In opposition-held areas, the only real independent media are those funded by foreign INGOs, which do not invest as much as the economic, political and military powers directly or indirectly involved in the conflict do.

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: It is still very strong in the zones under the control of the government and in the Kurdish-majority regions. 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, also because many of them are legally and physically based in Turkey losing their direct contact with the reality on the ground.

Media

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 *Al-Ghirbal*, issued in Kafr Nabl, Idlib and *Hibr*, a weekly magazine from Aleppo) 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 Majd 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). 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.

Opposition-controlled territories and Kurdish-majority zones

Opposition-aligned publications are distributed inside Syria according to the following four distinct patterns/regions:

- In the area comprising Aleppo and Idlib governorates and the opposition-controlled area of Hama governorate (to the South), there is the largest concentration of distribution networks and a relatively easier access to most publications due to their proximity to the printing centres in Turkey.
- The opposition-controlled areas of al-Qunaytra, Daraa, Ghuta are generally cut-off from the main distribution networks of the larger publications, as there is no route to them from Turkey. Nevertheless, there are some small-scale printing and distribution activities here, mostly for local publications.
- In Kurdish-controlled regions, the distribution is subject to the approval of the local autonomous administration.
- In the government-held Syria, there are only minimal and individual distribution efforts because of the dangers entailed.

The majority of these magazines 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, Idlib and Damascus countryside 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). The least represented regions are those under IS control for the

obvious security risks, with the most prominent exception to this being *'Ayn al-Madina*, reporting on Dayr al-Zawr under IS (their website is no longer active, the news are published on their Facebook page).

There are emerging publications devoted to children and young adults (*Tin Ba'l*, *Hintawi*, *'Ata'*, *Khutuwat Saghira* still in activity); to women issues (*Mazaya*, *Yasmin Suriya*, *Sayyidat Suriya*); to human rights issues (*Al-Kawakibi*, issued in Arabic and English); one specialised in infographics (*AIN Infographics*). Since 2011, three Kurdish publications have been established: *Buyer*, *Shar*, *Welat*. They publish both in Kurdish and Arabic.

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, 4th and 9th 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. None of these independent media institutions are 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. Today only four radios are still without any legal framework: *Hara*, *Ruh*, *Fresh* and *Hawa SmArt*. 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. *Ruh* is a small radio based on voluntary work and it is less institutionalised than all the other radios. 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-Jazeera* 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 as *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.

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 5.5 million Internet users in Syria (Internet Live Stats, July 2016), with a penetration of 29.6 percent of the population.

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, Internet websites are highly accessible to a large sector of the Syrian public. Trend-wise, websites diverge from the patterns seen in non-digital news media. Instead of one or two dominant news websites, there is a balanced mix of pro-government and opposition sources. One of the most interesting findings here relates to the second position occupied by *Yawmiyyat Qadhifat Hawun* (The Mortar Diaries). Compared to SANA (number one on the list), it is a site for which a clear affiliation cannot be determined, documenting events of the conflict without explicitly taking sides and dealing mainly with daily matters that relate to the urgent and immediate needs of Syrians. Overall,

opposition websites still have a limited weight. Three are present among the most-followed sites. This tendency might be due to the total censorship imposed by the government on all opposition websites and on those that in some way 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).

As far as the use of mobile phone as a news source is concerned, this is not widespread. This finding can be explained by the extremely high cost of mobile Internet subscription, the unreliable Internet connections and limited coverage and the deteriorating state of the mobile infrastructures.

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; the conservative *Shaam.org* created in 2011, the pro-opposition *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, there are: *Syria-News.com* and *SyriaNow*. Other sources of news online are local media platforms (as the aforementioned *Yawmiyyat Qadhifat Hawun*), which they mainly function on Facebook.

Social Networks

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. According to 2015 Arab Social Media Report (ASMR), even in a country with a comparably small penetration rate such as Syria, users are still adopting Facebook at a higher scale than the world's top ten countries. Facebook overshadows all other social media tools, with a number of users surpassing 6 million people. However, the use of Facebook remains more personal and, where information is transacted, it 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.

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. With 3.225 million followers, the most popular account belongs to Adnan al-Arouf, 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. Second-ranking (with more than 2 million followers) is the account devoted to the late controversial Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani and in the top ten there is another personality from the literary world: Ghada Samman, another much-loved and just as much controversial Syrian writer, with two accounts dedicated to her. From the media sector, there are two accounts in the top ten: the *Sham News Network* of the namesake opposition media outlet and Hadi al-Abdallah, a Syrian citizen journalist and activist who was awarded the Press Freedom Prize by Reporters Without Borders (RWB) in November 2016. Three accounts belong to Syrian celebrities: singers Assala Nasri and Farrah Yousef and actor Kosai Khauli. The account belonging to *Amanat muhafazat Jedda* (the Jeddah Municipality) ranks fourth.

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-Jazeera* anchorman living in Qatar. For years he has taken overtly harsh anti-government positions and on his Facebook pages enjoys more than 11 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-Ikhabariyya*). 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.

Sources

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Radio

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- [Radio Sham](#)
- [Sawt al-Sha'b](#)
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TV

- [Al-Jisr TV](#)

Digital media

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Social Networks

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Opinion Makers

- [Buthayna Shaaban’s Mayadin Column](#)
- [Faysal al-Qasim FB page](#)

Organisations

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 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 is helping 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.

Wikalat A'maq al-ikhbariyya (Amaq News Agency) is not officially linked to Islamic State, even though it functions like an official part of its media apparatus. Its name started to appear for the first time in 2014. It spreads IS propaganda, but being somehow removed from the group, it has more of an appearance of legitimacy. *Amaq* has launched an official mobile app and a Telegram account.

In the Kurdish context, *Ajansa Rojnamevaniya Azad* (Independent Press Agency - ARA News), established in 2013, is probably the most popular. It is online in both Arabic and English and focuses on the events of the region. *Hawar News Agency* (ANHA) is another 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.

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.

Sources

- [ARA News](#)
- [Free News Agency](#)
- [Hawar News](#)
- [SANA](#)
- [SMART News Agency](#)
- [The Syrian Journalists Association](#)
- [The Union of Journalists in Syria](#)

Policies

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 licences 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’-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 also law 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.

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 (Damascus and Latakia) 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. According to sources in Homs and Aleppo, in these two war-torn and semi-destroyed cities there are no more news kiosks and no newspaper is distributed. 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 comply 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.

In areas where the Islamic State Organisation (IS) exercises its authority, it tightly controls the dissemination of information and systematically enforces its own repressive legal system, including provisions pertaining to the media and regularly using violence and intimidation to silence critics of its rule. In 2014, observers obtained a list of 11 non-negotiable conditions issued by the IS press office aimed at journalists. These include rules requiring journalists to apply for a license to practice their job to the IS media office and to submit most of their work to official censorship authorities prior to publication.

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.

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.”

On 15 August 2014, the Kurdish Supreme Committee, the governing body in the Kurdish majority areas of Syria, established the *Yekîtiya Ragîhandîna Azad* (Union of Free Media - YRA). The YRA, based in Qamishli, is an official body with numerous press-related functions that functions as a sort of Information Ministry. It is the only official body that oversees media organisations that want to work in Rojava. Therefore, all news media in the Kurdish cantons must request and obtain permits from the YRA 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 body to monitor and control independent media. 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.

Sources

Laws, regulations, institutions

- [2011 Media Law \(Decree No. 108\)](#)
- [2012 Syrian Constitution](#)
- [2012 Cybercrime Law](#)
- [National Media Council](#) (NMC)
- [Publications Law \(Decree No. 50/ 2001\)](#)
- [Syrian Penal Code](#)

Education

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 and Mass Communication. 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 county 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 boast 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 undergone 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 is now retaking 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 five 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.

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Conclusions

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, along the route axis Dar’a-Aleppo and in particular in Dar’a, Damascus, Homs, Hama, Idlib and Aleppo regions. While in the Kurdish-held areas, local media outlets will continue to develop their tools and structures, the ongoing trend should definitely narrow the already tiny physical room for independent and politically biased media outlets based in opposition-held areas. These media entities will likely be forced to move their premises and local staff abroad: With all probability 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.

On the one hand, in an increasingly high militarised context overwhelmed by the rhetoric of the 'external threat', this trend would increase the use of polarised narratives in producing media contents and deepen the gap of perceptions between the editorial desks outside the country and the audiences remained in war-torn Syria under the newly-imposed pro-Iranian and pro-Russian local authorities. On the other hand, the relatively independent media activism atmosphere emerged in 2011 should continue to blow in the wind in expanded government-held areas. This could serve as a stimulus for the entire Syrian media landscape, which 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. This 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.

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 will likely keep 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 - will probably receive less and less financial support by European and American donors. Nevertheless, in the long run one of the main objectives of Syrian media operators could be to boost their individual and corporate capacities in improving standards in terms of independence and transparency. Towards a plural but shared common Syrian identity.

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