

A large, professional video camera is silhouetted against a clear blue sky. The camera is mounted on a tripod and is positioned on the right side of the frame. In the background, a hazy landscape is visible, with a plume of smoke rising from the left side, suggesting a conflict zone. The overall scene is a mix of blue, brown, and white tones.

# SYRIA'S NEW MEDIA LANDSCAPE

INDEPENDENT MEDIA BORN OUT OF WAR

Antoun Issa

MEI Policy Paper 2016-9

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**Syria's New Media  
Landscape**

**Independent Media Born  
Out of War**

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**Middle East Institute**

THIS PAPER IS DEDICATED TO THE SCORES OF SYRIAN JOURNALISTS RISKING THEIR LIVES TO TELL THEIR NATION'S TRAGIC STORY.

SPECIAL THANKS TO PAUL SALEM FOR HIS INVALUABLE ADVICE AND GUIDANCE, AS WELL AS BRIDGET GILL, JOSEPH LEONE, KRISTOPHER KALIHER, MUSTAFA DABBAS, IBRAHIM AL-ASSIL AND ZANA OMER FOR THEIR ASSISTANCE IN COMPLETING THIS PROJECT.

A NOTE OF GRATITUDE ALSO TO THE MORE THAN A DOZEN SYRIAN MEDIA OUTLETS, AND SEVERAL NGOs AND U.S. GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS WHO WERE INTERVIEWED DURING THE RESEARCH FOR THIS PAPER.

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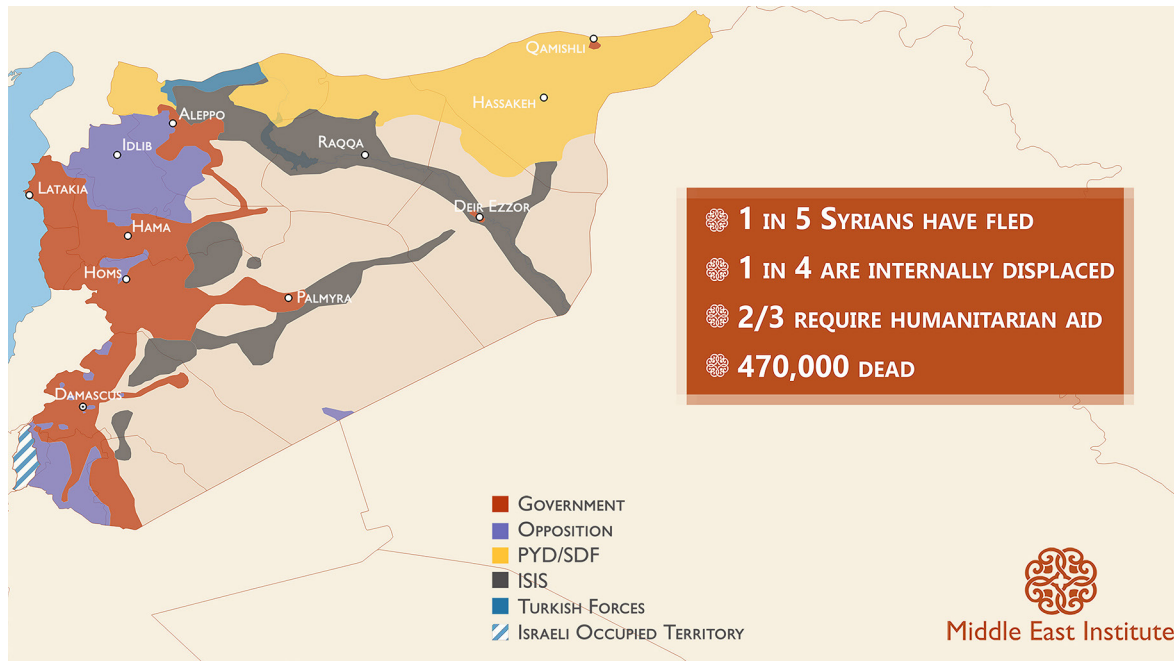
## SUMMARY

The Syrian Civil War has shaken the country's media landscape and provided space for the nascent emergence of an independent Syrian media. Syria's media culture is undergoing significant transformation from a top-down, state-run industry, to a diverse arena populated by competing viewpoints and driven by communities. This paper maps the changes in Syrian media since the beginning of the uprising in 2011, and explores the constraints facing independent media moving forward. Stronger mechanisms to support independent media in Syria are needed—such as additional and consistent funding, industry associations, and ease of travel—to develop a more open media culture in Syria, and foster a democratic and pluralistic post-conflict society.

## KEY FINDINGS

- ◆ Since 2011, the Syrian conflict has led to the creation of a robust and diverse independent media culture within the country, with at least 196 outlets currently operating across political lines
- ◆ Lack of access to Internet and electricity in rebel-held areas has seen a focus on traditional forms of media, such as radio and newspapers
- ◆ Foreign governments and NGOs have provided funding and trained Syrian journalists to increase the quality of reporting
- ◆ Independent media remains heavily dependent on foreign aid as the war has prevented new outlets from establishing business models and revenue streams
- ◆ Guarantees for press freedom should be included in any political negotiations to ensure independent media survives in a post-war Syria

FIGURE I - MAP OF SYRIA AND RESPECTIVE ZONES OF CONTROL



## INTRODUCTION

With nearly 5 million registered refugees,<sup>1</sup> at least 6 million internally displaced, and over 470,000 dead, Syria is nothing short of a catastrophe. In addition to the humanitarian cost, the war has ravaged Syria's economy and infrastructure, with 85 percent of the population living in poverty and the reconstruction and redevelopment total bill reaching \$255 billion as of the end of 2015—the equivalent of 468 percent of Syria's G.D.P. in 2010. The prospects for economic recovery if and when a peaceful settlement to the war has been reached are daunting to say the least.

But the civil war and the breakdown of state authority have also allowed space for an independent media to develop. On the sidelines of the war, a robust community of Syrian activists, professionals and journalists have organized and are working to not only document the war, but prepare for a post-conflict Syria in which they hope to play a significant part. Any eventual full or partial transition

to democracy is not simply a matter of changes to a political system, such as the introduction of elections or constitutional amendments, but also requires a societal shift in which accountability, critical thinking and tolerance—pillars of a democratic society—become part of the social fabric.

This paper examines the emergence of independent Syrian media since the outbreak of the uprising in 2011, the relative improvement in the standards of journalism that it has brought, and the necessity to support it now and ensure its survival in a post-war environment.

The existence of independent Syrian media, and its continued development, is reflective of the aspirations of a significant portion of the Syrian population that are victims of the armed conflict and left outside the on-again-off-again political negotiations between the government and opposition factions. It also reflects a segment of Syrians that do not aspire to a Syria defined by sectarianism, religious fundamentalism, or repressive autocracy. Independent Syrian media have provided this important sector of Syria's population a voice and representation.

**“The civil war and the breakdown of state authority have allowed space for an independent media to develop.”**

It has also given foreign governments and international organizations searching for an end to this conflict an opening to assist with democratic transition at the grassroots level.

While diplomatic energy has been heavily focused on the top level—whether President Bashar al-Assad should stay or go and the makeup of any interim government—independent Syrian journalists are already contributing to democratization efforts at the ground level simply by pursuing their line of work. Much of their work has already been aided by Western governments and NGOs, and such support should continue if a democratic Syria is to have any chance of emerging from the ruins of war.



# SYRIA'S UPRISING AND THE EMERGENCE OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA

The uprising against President Bashar al-Assad in 2011 brought with it an urgency to document events on the ground. The chaos created by the protests, and the newly opened areas of limited or no governance, resulted in an outburst of new media outlets, predominantly newspapers. There were as many as 298 newspapers being circulated in different parts of the country during various periods of the uprising, in addition to 17 state-run or regime-affiliated newspapers.<sup>6</sup> According to a director at *Enab Baladi*, an independent Syrian media outlet, “after 40 years of repression, media was an avenue to express ... newly discovered freedom.”<sup>7</sup> A journalist in Aleppo, who wished to remain anonymous, said they had no media background prior to the uprising, but felt the need to provide an alternative narrative to state-run media:

“There was a need for people outside to know what was going on in Syria. Before the revolution, journalism was trapped in the regime, nothing would

“There were as many as 298 newspapers being circulated in different parts of the country during various periods of the uprising.”

come out of Syria other than from the government. After a while, people came, like me, who don't have journalistic experience, and they started saying no, there needs to be more: a journalism that portrays the reality, not just the government's media.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the proliferation of newspapers, which targeted local communities, citizen journalists resorted to smartphones to film and record on-the-ground events, distributing them via social media tools such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.

While this presented an alternative narrative to international audiences, the footage and reports emanating from citizen journalists faced severe credibility issues. The partisan nature of citizen journalists, and their dual identities as opposition activists, raised doubts over the reliability and accuracy of the reports.<sup>9</sup> One director of an independent Syrian radio network complained

in 2014 that the reports coming from “activists” were not always professional. “They have a tendency to exaggerate information to better accuse the regime. In reality, this plays in favor of the regime as it permits them to delegitimize the sources of information more easily.”<sup>10</sup>

In the newsrooms of foreign media, editors became increasingly reluctant to run versions of events relayed by activists for fear of being manipulated. Indeed, the 2011 case of a supposed lesbian blogger in Damascus, who turned out to be

**“One director of an independent Syrian radio network complained that the reports coming from “activists” were not always professional.”**

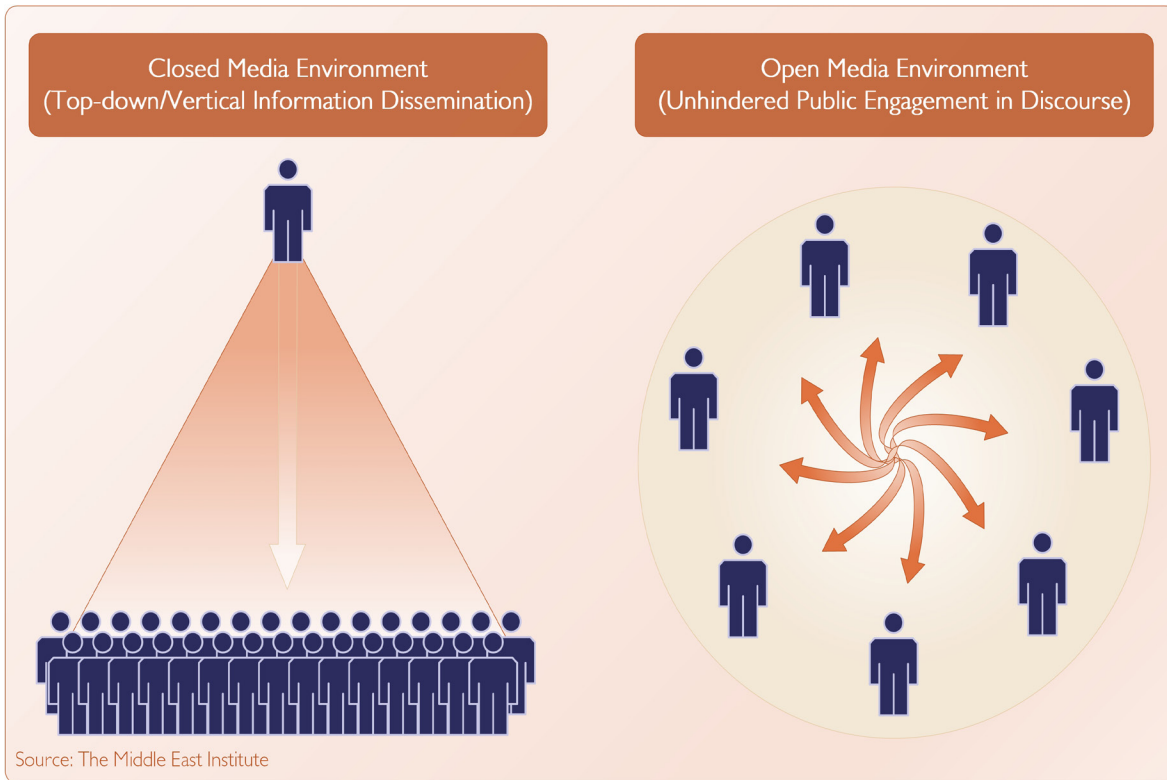
an American male living in Scotland,<sup>11</sup> was a warning sign to foreign media outlets to practice prudence when dealing with content

coming from Syria.

The difficulties faced in media coverage in the first year of the uprising can be narrowed to three factors: 1) the lack of trustworthy, professional independent media on the ground in Syria that could be depended upon to document and verify events, and report them at a high professional standard; 2) the lack of impartial coverage due to the confluence of political activism and citizen journalism; and 3) a lack of basic reporting skills, ranging from writing to technical broadcast skills.

# DEVELOPMENT OF SYRIAN MEDIA CULTURE

FIGURE 2 — OPEN VS CLOSED MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS

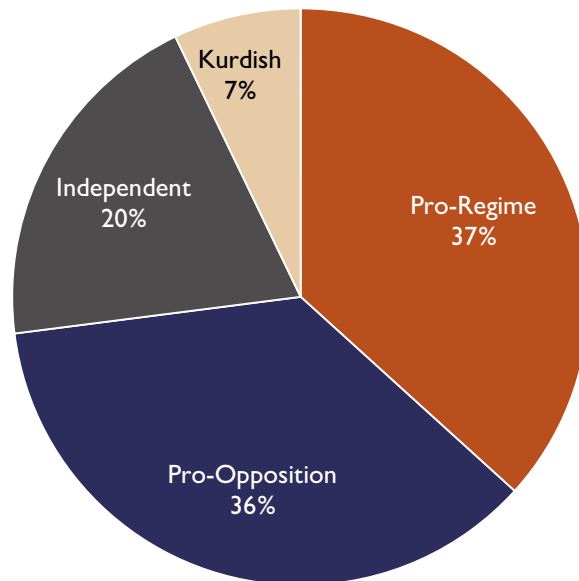


Prior to 2011, Syria’s media space was closed and largely driven top-down (see Figure 2) to reinforce the legitimacy of the Ba’athist regime, thus pre-empting real public discourse. Media was certainly not an instrument by which the public could hold the powers-that-be in society accountable for their actions. While the war has fragmented the country, the shift in the media landscape to being community-driven, more transparent and critical is a national phenomenon. The war has enabled new Syrian media, mainly within rebel-held areas—but also within some regime-held areas—to gradually shift to a dynamic that includes expectations and accountability. What began as haphazard, chaotic, unreliable reporting in 2011 has developed—with assistance in some cases from foreign NGOs—to more professional, organized media outfits that have raised the standards of journalism in the country as a whole.

A comprehensive, non-exhaustive list<sup>12</sup> (Figure 4) found at least 196 active media outlets. This study assembled the 196 outlets into four categories: pro-opposition, independent, pro-regime and independent Kurdish. The distinction was determined based on language used in the coverage, which indicated the level of bias within the reporting (see Figure 7). This method found that 71 of the 196 media outlets were considered pro-opposition, 39 independent, 72 pro-regime, and 14 independent Kurdish (excluding party-affiliated media).

Critical reporting remains a challenge in both rebel- and regime-held areas for security reasons, and shall remain so until a peaceful resolution is found. Nevertheless, the incremental steps toward critical reporting have been taken, and are important to note.

FIGURE 3 – ACTIVE NON-STATE MEDIA OUTLETS IN SYRIA



## MEDIA IN REBEL-HELD ZONES

Various shades of grey distinguish independent outlets from pro-opposition, as the bulk of independent outlets aspire to democratic change, which directly places them in opposition to the regime. However, independent outlets were seen to at least aspire to establish a professional standard of journalism and apply critical reporting to rebels as well as the regime, and deploy terminology that appeared to be neutral (see Figure 7). Independent Kurdish media was

given a separate category as coverage focuses primarily on community-related issues in the northeastern areas of Syria that are under Kurdish militia rule.

**FIGURE 4 - LIST OF NON-STATE MEDIA IN SYRIA**

INDEPENDENT MEDIA			
NAME	MEDIUM	DISTRIBUTED	LANGUAGE(S)
AIN SYRIAN INFOGRAPHIC	ONLINE/PRINT	ALEPPO, IDLIB	AR
AKS ALSIR	ONLINE		AR
AL IQTISADI	ONLINE		
AL-AYYAM	ONLINE		AR
AL-HAL AL-SOURI	ONLINE		AR
AL-MOKHAYAM	ONLINE		
AL-YARMOUK	RADIO	YARMOUK, DAMASCUS	AR
ALEPPO MEDIA CENTER	ONLINE/RADIO	ALEPPO	
ANA PRESS	ONLINE/RADIO		AR/EN
DAWDAA'	ONLINE/PRINT		AR
DAY PRESS	ONLINE		AR
ENAB BALADI	ONLINE/PRINT	SYRIA: ALEPPO, IDLIB, HAMA, LATAKIA; TURKEY: ISTANBUL, GAZIANTEP, ANTAKYA	AR/EN
FRESH SYRIA	ONLINE/RADIO	IDLIB	AR
GOOD MORNING SYRIA	ONLINE		EN/AR
HALAB TODAY	TV	ALL OF SYRIA	AR
HARA FM	ONLINE/RADIO		
HENTAWI	ONLINE/PRINT		
MELODY FM	RADIO	DAMASCUS	
NASA'EM SOURIA	RADIO	ALEPPO, RAQQA, IDLIB	AR
OXYGEN	ONLINE		
RADIO AL-KUL	RADIO	ALEPPO, IDLIB, NILESAT	
RADIO AL-WAN	RADIO	ALEPPO AND IDLIB, PLANNING TO EXPAND TO JARABULUS AND MANBIJ	AR
RADIO RAYA	RADIO	IDLIB, WESTERN ALEPPO AND PARTS OF HAMA	AR
RADIO ROUH (SOUL)	RADIO	ALEPPO, IDLIB, HAMA, LATAKIA, DEIR EZZOR, KOBANI, DARAA	
RAQQA POST	ONLINE		
ROZANA	ONLINE/RADIO		AR/EN
SADA AL-SHAAM	ONLINE/PRINT	SYRIA: ALEPPO, IDLIB, HAMA, LATAKIA; TURKEY: ISTANBUL AND GAZIANTEP	AR
SAYEDAT SOURIA	ONLINE/PRINT		AR

## INDEPENDENT MEDIA

NAME	MEDIUM	DISTRIBUTED	LANGUAGE(S)
SIBA	PRINT		AR
SMART NEWS AGENCY	ONLINE/RADIO		AR
SOURIALI	RADIO	ALEPPO, IDLIB, DAMASCUS, HAMA	AR
SOURIATNA	ONLINE/PRINT	SYRIA: ALEPPO, IDLIB, LATAKIA, AFRIN; TURKEY: GAZINTEP, ISTANBUL, URFA, ANTAKYA, RAYHANA, AND KALAS	AR
SUWAR	ONLINE/PRINT	SYRIA: ALEPPO, IDLIB, HASSAKEH; TURKEY: GAZIATNAP, OURFA, MARDINE, GAZIANTEB, YARANSHER, MERSIN, ANTAKYA, UTHMANIYAH; IRAQ: LEBANON: JORDAN	AR
SYRIA NEWS	ONLINE		AR
SYRIA NEW DESK	ONLINE		AR
SYRIA UNTOLD	ONLINE		EN/AR
SYRNET	RADIO	ALEPPO, IDLIB, HAMA, DARAA, QAMISHLI, DEIR EZZOR, KOBANI	AR
WATAN FM	RADIO	ALEPPO, IDLIB, HAMA, DARAA, QUNEITRA	AR

## PRO-OPPOSITION MEDIA

NAME	MEDIUM	DISTRIBUTED	LANGUAGES(S)
AL-AHD	ONLINE/PRINT		AR
AL-ETIHAD PRESS	ONLINE		AR
AL-GHAD	ONLINE		AR
AL-GHERBAL	ONLINE/PRINT	IDLIB, ALEPPO	AR
AL-HARMAL	ONLINE/PRINT	TURKEY, ALEPPO, IDLIB, LATAKIA	AR/TR
AL-HUDA ISLAMIC MAGAZINE	ONLINE/PRINT	EASTERN GHOUTA	
AL-ITIHAD (USCO)	PRINT		
AL-JUMHURIYA	ONLINE		AR/SOME EN
AL-KHABAR	ONLINE/PRINT		AR
AL-KHAT AL-AMAMI	ONLINE/PRINT	DAMASCUS, HAMA, HOMS, LATAKIA, TARTUS, IDLIB, ALEPPO, MAART, HASSAKEH, QAMISHLI	
AL-MANTRAA	ONLINE/PRINT	SOUTHERN IDLIB	AR
AL-NABA	ONLINE/PRINT	ALEPPO	AR
AL-OMARI NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE		AR
AL-SOURI AL-JADID	ONLINE		AR
AL-SOURIA NET	ONLINE		AR
ALL4SYRIA	ONLINE		AR

## PRO-OPPOSITION MEDIA

NAME	MEDIUM	DISTRIBUTED	LANGUAGES(S)
ARIHA TODAY	ONLINE		AR
ASHKARAH	ONLINE		AR/EN
AYN AL-MADINA	ONLINE/PRINT	SYRIA: ALEPPO, IDLIB; TURKEY: GAZIANTEP, URFA, KILLIS	AR/SOME EN
BALADI NEWS	ONLINE		AR/EN
BASEERAH	ONLINE		AR
BERCAV	ONLINE/PRINT	NORTHEASTERN SYRIA	
DAMASCUS MEDIA OFFICE	ONLINE		AR
DARAA & AL-SWEIDA UNIFIED NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE		AR
DARAYA MEDIA CENTER	ONLINE		AR
DEIR EZZOR 24	ONLINE		AR/EN
DEIR PRESS NETWORK (D.P.N.)	ONLINE		AR/EN
EMISSA - CAPITAL OF THE REVOLUTION	ONLINE/PRINT		AR
EYE ON THE HOMELAND	ONLINE/PRINT/RADIO		AR/EN
FOCUS ALEPPO	ONLINE	ALEPPO	
HALAB NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE		AR
HAMA MEDIA CENTER	ONLINE		AR
HIBR	ONLINE/PRINT	ALEPPO, IDLIB	AR
ISRAK	ONLINE/PRINT	GAZIANTEP, URFA, MERSA, ADANA	AR
JABLEH AL-ADHAMIIYA NEWS	ONLINE		AR
JASMINE SYRIA	ONLINE/PRINT		AR
JOBAR MEDIA BUREAU	ONLINE	DAMASCUS	AR
JOBAR QUARTER NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	DAMASCUS	AR
KULLNA SOURIYOUN	ONLINE		AR
LATTAKIA AS IT HAPPENS	ONLINE		AR
MADA SOURIA	ONLINE		AR
MADAR AL-YOUM	ONLINE		AR
MASAR PRESS	ONLINE		AR
MAZAYA	ONLINE/PRINT	MAARAT AL NUMAN, MAAR TAHROMA, JABAL ALZAWIYA, JABALA, AND KAFRANBEL	AR
NABAA [MEDIA FOUNDATION]	ONLINE		AR
NOUR SYRIA	ONLINE		AR
ORIENT	ONLINE/TV	ALL OF SYRIA	AR/EN

## PRO-OPPOSITION MEDIA

NAME	MEDIUM	DISTRIBUTED	LANGUAGES(S)
QASIOUN	ONLINE		AR/EN/KU
ROYAH SOURIYAH	ONLINE/PRINT	ALEPPO, DAMASCUS, IDLIB, DARAA, DEIR EZZOR	
SANA OF THE REVOLUTION	ONLINE		AR
SHAAM NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE		AR/EN
SHADA HURRIYA TV	ONLINE /TV		AR
SHAHBA PRESS	ONLINE		AR
SHAHID	ONLINE		AR
SHARARAT ADHAR	PRINT		AR
SOURIA HOURIA	ONLINE		FR/AR/EN/TU
SOURIYATI	ONLINE		AR
STEP [KHUTWA] NEWS AGENCY	ONLINE		AR
SURIYA AL-GHAD	TV		
SURIYA AL-SHAAB	TV		
SYRIA MUBASHER	ONLINE		AR
SYRIAN FREE PRESS	ONLINE		AR/EN
SYRIAN PRESS CENTRE (SPC - AL-HADATH)	ONLINE/INTERNET RADIO/PRINT	IDLIB, HAMA	
SYRIAN REVOLUTION NETWORK	ONLINE		AR
TAMADDON	ONLINE/PRINT	TURKEY, NORTH SYRIA	AR
TLENA AL-HURRIYAH	ONLINE/PRINT		AR
UGARIT NEWS	ONLINE		AR
YAQEEEN	ONLINE		AR
ZABADANI NEWS	ONLINE		AR
ZAITON	ONLINE/PRINT	SYRIA: IDLIB, ALEPPO, HAMA, TURKEY: GAZIANTEP	AR
ZAMAN AL-WASL	ONLINE		AR/EN

## PRO-REGIME MEDIA

NAME	MEDIUM	LANGUAGES(S)
AKHBAR AL-WATAN	ONLINE	AR
AL-BAATH	ONLINE/PRINT	AR
AL-DOUNIA	ONLINE/TV	AR
AL-HAMDANIYA NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
AL-MASDAR	ONLINE	EN
AL-OURUBA	ONLINE/PRINT	AR
AL-QARYATEIN NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR



## PRO-REGIME MEDIA

NAME	MEDIUM	LANGUAGES(S)
AL-SHAM AL-AKHBARIYYA	ONLINE	AR
AL-SWEIDA NEWS	ONLINE	AR
AL-THAWRA	ONLINE/PRINT	AR
AL-WAAD AL-SADIQ NEWS	ONLINE	AR
AL-WATAN	ONLINE/PRINT	AR
ALEPPO & COUNTRYSIDE NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
ALEPPO AL-SHAHBAA NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
ALEPPO IN OUR HEARTS NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
ALEPPO NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
ALEPPO NEWS NETWORK - MOGAMBO	ONLINE	AR
ALEPPO NEWS NETWORK - NILE ST. & ZAHRAA	ONLINE	AR
ASSAD'S SYRIA NEWS, MOMENT BY MOMENT	ONLINE	AR
BALADNA	ONLINE	AR
BLADNA ONLINE	ONLINE	AR
CHAM PRESS	ONLINE	AR/EN
DAMASCUS NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
DARAA & QUNEITRA SUPPORTING NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
DEIR AL ZOUR NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
DIMASHQ NOW	ONLINE	AR
F.S.N.N. NEWS NETWORKS	ONLINE	AR
FIELD NEWS NETWORK - SHAM JASMINE	ONLINE	AR
HAMA & AL-GHAB NEWS	ONLINE	AR
HAMA NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
HOMS NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
HOURLAN NEWS AGENCY	ONLINE	AR
IBLEB NEWS NETWORK - LOCAL & MILITARY	ONLINE	AR
IDLEB NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
IDLEB PRESS	ONLINE	AR
JABLEH CITY NEWS	ONLINE	AR
JARAMANA NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
JOB AL-JARRAH NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
JOUHINA	ONLINE/PRINT	AR
KASSIOUN	ONLINE/PRINT	AR
LATTAKIA NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
MANQOUL NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
NAS NEWS	ONLINE	AR
QNN/QABOUN NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR

## PRO-REGIME MEDIA

NAME	MEDIUM	LANGUAGES(S)
QUMHANEH NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
RAQQA NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
SAMA TV	TV	AR
SAMIDOUN PRESS	ONLINE	AR
SCANDALS OF THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION	ONLINE	AR
SHAAM NEWS	ONLINE	AR
SHAAM TIMES	ONLINE	AR
SHABAB NEWS	ONLINE	AR
SHAM FM	ONLINE/RADIO/TV	AR
SOURIANA NEWS (S.N.N.)	ONLINE	AR
SWAIDA NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
SYRIA AL-YOM	ONLINE	AR
SYRIA IS ABOVE ALL	ONLINE	AR
SYRIA NOW	ONLINE	AR
SYRIA STEPS	ONLINE	AR
SYRIA TIMES	ONLINE	EN
SYRIA TRUE TUBE	ONLINE	AR
SYRIAN COAST NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
SYRIAN DAYS	ONLINE	AR
SYRIAN NEWS FROM ALEPPO - 'WITHSTAND' (AL-SUMOUD)	ONLINE	AR
SYRIAN REPORTER	ONLINE	AR/EN
SYRIAN TELEGRAPH	ONLINE	AR
SYRIAN TRUTH	ONLINE	AR
TARTOUS NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
THIS IS TARTOUS NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
TISHREEN	ONLINE/PRINT	AR
YOUTH WHO LOVE SYRIA NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR
ZAHRAA QUARTER IN ALEPPO NEWS NETWORK	ONLINE	AR

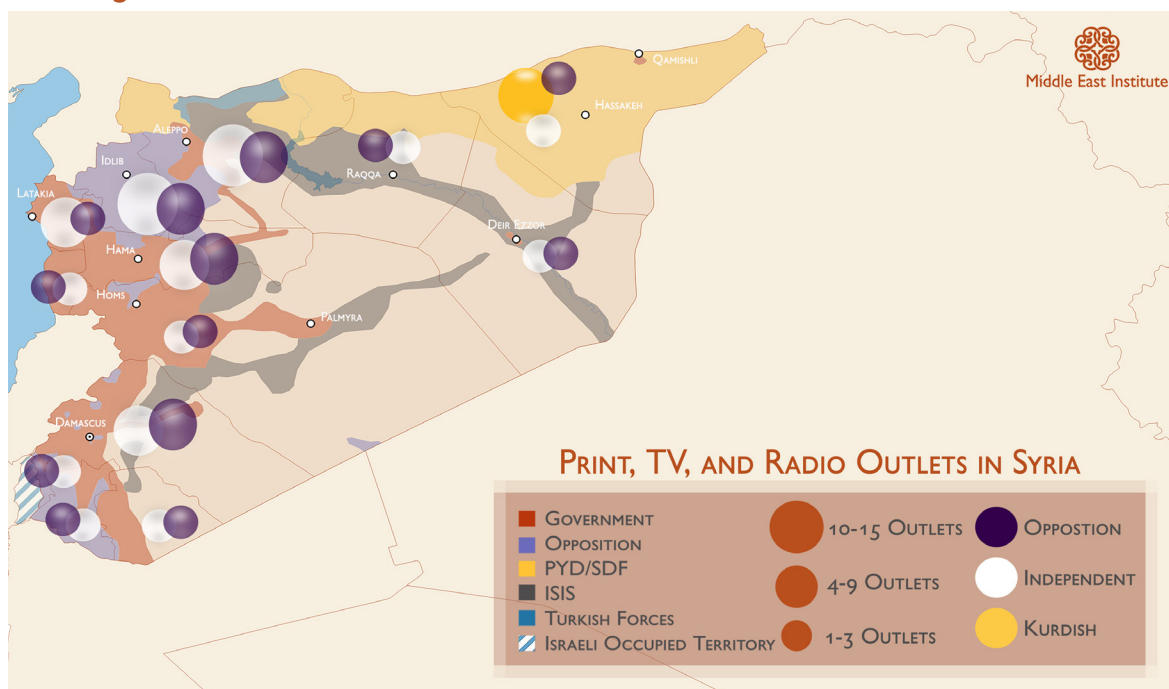
## INDEPENDENT KURDISH MEDIA

NAME	MEDIUM	LANGAUGES(S)
ARA NEWS (AJANSA ROJNAMEVANIYA AZAD)	ONLINE	AR/EN
ARTA FM	RADIO	KU/AR/SY/ARM
BUYER PRESS	ONLINE/PRINT	KU/AR
DENKI MEH	ONLINE/PRINT	KU/AR
GUL	RADIO	KU/AR
HEVI	RADIO	KU/AR
NİVİSKAR	PRINT	KU/AR
NU DEM	PRINT	KU
ONE FM	RADIO	KU/AR/EN
PENUSA NU/AL-QALAM AL-JADEED	ONLINE/PRINT	KU/AR
RÊ	PRINT	KU/AR
SHAR	ONLINE/PRINT	KU/AR
SORMEY	PRINT	KU/AR
WELAT	RADIO	AR/EN

\*WHILE THERE ARE NUMEROUS INDEPENDENT KURDISH MEDIA WEBSITES, THIS LIST FOCUSES ONLY ON THOSE BASED IN SYRIA

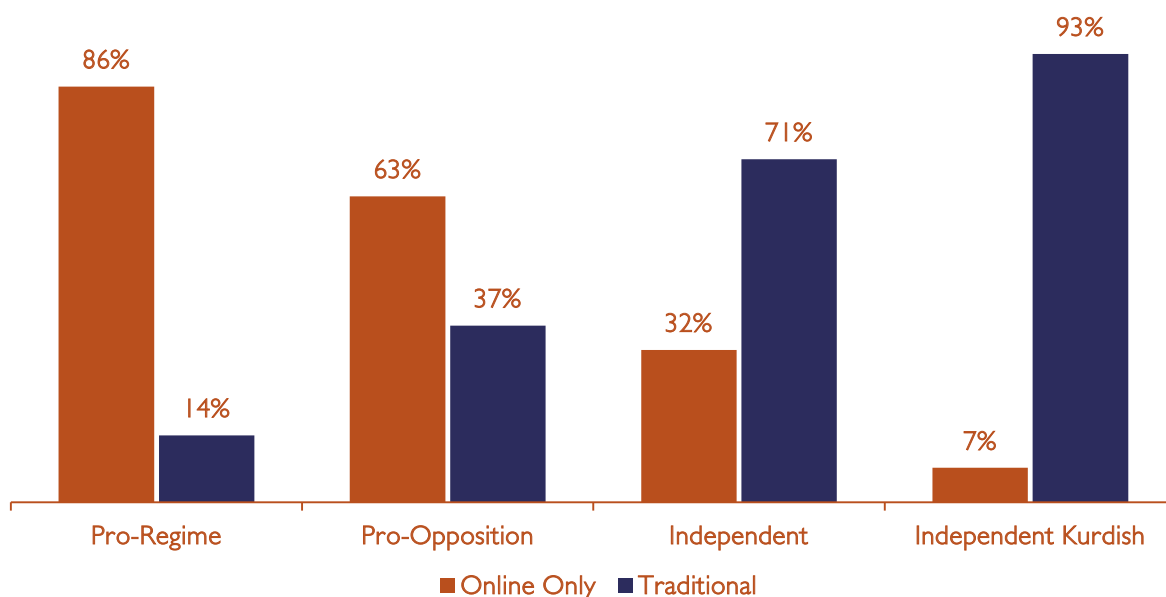
Regime control of the major urban centers and Islamic State rule in the east have confined the reach of pro-opposition and independent media to areas that are either contested or under rebel control (see Figure 5). Indeed, several opposition media listed in Figure 4 had ceased print distribution due to security as well as financial reasons, opting to remain online outlets only.<sup>13</sup> Not all independent media outlets are able to distribute throughout all rebel-held areas, due to logistical challenges and fragmented geographic space caused by the war. The largest concentration of independent media is in Aleppo and Idlib, while some outlets are found in other pockets of rebel rule, including Daraa and Quneitra in the south, and in parts of Hama and Latakia provinces. One radio station interviewed for this article said they were able to transmit their broadcasts into Raqqa, but there is otherwise scant media penetration of ISIS-controlled areas. Similar limitations are found in the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (P.Y.D.)-held areas of northeastern Syria, with some non-Kurdish independent outlets having to negotiate distribution and access to the areas.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, a vibrant independent media scene is developing in P.Y.D. areas, despite facing tough competition from better resourced and more numerous party-affiliated media outlets (such as Ronahi TV, Orkes FM, and Hawar News Agency, among others).

FIGURE 5: MAP OF MEDIA OUTLETS IN SYRIA



The lack of electricity and Internet coverage in rebel-held areas has seen a proliferation of traditional media forms such as newspapers and radio, as opposed to online media. The majority of independent media are indeed forms of traditional media, with 72 percent out of the 39 independent outlets either newspapers, radio or television stations. Conversely, the majority of the 71 pro-opposition media outlets are online—63 percent—and based outside of Syria (see Figure 6). Online media is primarily targeted at the large Syrian diaspora and refugee community abroad. It is difficult to determine how such online media would be integrated into a post-war media landscape within Syria, with neither a base of operations nor its primary audience within the country. In this instance, independent media within Syria maintain an advantage, even if their current forms are traditional, given the extent of their operations on the ground, including the utilization of local journalists, editorial teams and distribution networks, as well as their engagement with local communities. Indeed, online media outlets based outside the country seeking footing within Syria might consider partnering with locally established traditional independent media, who would no doubt be seeking online platforms in a post-war environment, with the necessary electricity and Internet infrastructure restored.

FIGURE 6: ONLINE MEDIA VS TRADITIONAL MEDIA



Critical reporting is more widespread in rebel-held areas than in regime-held areas, largely due to the chaotic power structures and lack of governance in the former. Stories have ranged from Aleppo children mocking Islamist sermons, rising domestic violence in rebel- and Kurdish-held areas, to criticism of a massacre perpetrated by rebels against inhabitants of the Alawite village of Zara in May this year, and the kidnapping, torture and murder of a medic in Aleppo by Turkmen fighters.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, the dangers of criticizing armed actors in rebel-held areas remains high, as journalists who seek to hold local militias accountable often face retribution. Self-censorship is at times practiced to avoid running into strife with armed actors, as explained by the journalist in Aleppo:

“The most important thing is your safety. I can be critical of someone, but not to a large extent. If we know that a group will hurt us if we write something about them, we will not write it. Of course, this is only in the state of war. After, when there is rule of law and accountability, of course, we will write more freely, and we understand the codes of professionalism, ethics and objectivity in journalism. In a state of war, however, this is hard.”

The director of *Enab Baladi* elaborated further on the tensions they face with local armed groups:

“In Daraya, there was a time when a certain group began to radicalize and put a lot of pressure on *Enab Baladi* to become their voice, an outlet for their propaganda, and support them in whatever they do. We resisted, we rejected, and we were rejected—at times—by our own environment to maintain our independence.”

Exemplifying the challenges facing independent media, Enab Baladi staff have suffered harassment from both rebel groups and government forces.

“We’ve had incidents where one of our reporters was harmed by a rebel group, to send a message. We’ve had incidents where copies of the newspaper were burned in Aleppo during the Charlie Hebdo attack because we supported freedom of expression. When the Assad regime forces invaded Daraya (August 2012), they entered the office and ransacked it. Luckily the team fled Daraya and were in hiding, and were not captured. But we have two staff members who were taken by Assad authorities, and till today we don’t know where they are. We’ve had three editors killed in Daraya, the three were reporting for our newspaper: Ahmed Shehadi, Mohammed Qoreitam, and Mohammed Shehadi.”

## “The dangers of criticizing armed actors in rebel-held areas remains high.”

The ability to frequently engage foreign reporters crossing from Turkey into rebel-held areas of northern Syria also provided local journalists with the opportunity to work with foreign media. Indeed, many Syrian journalists in these areas work dual roles with local and

international media.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, the opportunities for Syrian journalists in these areas to work in their profession, and make an income, are slim. A deficiency in English means that many Syrian reporters can only manage to become stringers, photographers and videographers with international media, and are mostly used on a freelance basis. Other media outlets, such as *Syria Deeply* and *Al-Monitor*, provide translation services from Arabic-to-English, thus enabling Syrian journalists to contribute directly. The author was the founding editor of *Al-Monitor’s* Syria Pulse, identifying and collaborating with Syrian journalists across the country to produce regular content in Arabic. A significant amount of coaching was involved to elevate the standard of reporting and writing to ensure the quality of the reports met with a standard appreciated by Western audiences. This meant a focus on terminology deployed (particularly when referring to regime

or opposition forces), verification of sources and quotes, and a balanced and critical approach to reporting.

While outlets such as *Syria Deeply* and *Al-Monitor* offer space for Arabic-language Syrian journalists, and other international media provide occasional opportunities in assisting with their coverage, neither can be depended upon as sustainable forms of future employment for would-be journalists based in Syria. This places the emphasis on the need to develop indigenous, independent Syrian media outlets that are financially capable and organizationally sound to employ Syrian journalists, and ensure it is a viable profession to be pursued.

### FIGURE 7: DISTINGUISHING ALLEGIANCE BY TERMINOLOGY

#### Distinguishing Allegiance by Terminology

The distinctions between what categorized outlets as pro-regime, opposition or independent were determined by the terminology used in coverage. There is quite a marked difference in certain terms used and how they are applied in various media outlets.

The most basic identifier is whether an outlet calls the Assad government *nizām* (regime) or by the more neutral term *ḥukūma* (government), and the concomitant *quwāt al-nizām* (regime forces) versus *al-jayš al-‘arabī al-sūrī* (the Syrian Arab Army—its proper name). The second of each set of terms could indicate higher ethical standards of the outlet, but conversely, when paired with negative language about the opposition, it indicates a pro-Assad outlet. *Al-mu‘āriḍa al-musallaha* (the armed opposition) is fairly moderate, whereas *irhābiyyūn* (terrorists) is much more negative, and *al-jayš al-ḥurr* (The Free [Syrian] Army) is positive and shows sympathy. *‘Anāšir* (elements) falls somewhere in between, and when used to describe a group, such as elements of the opposition, regime forces or ISIS, it demonstrates negative sympathy.

The term *milišiyāt ṭā’ifiyya* (sectarian militias) is fairly negative and most commonly used to refer to Iranian, Afghan, and Lebanese fighters for the Assad government, though pretty rarely it is turned the other way around. *Milišiyāt* has also been used to refer to the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (S.D.F.) in opposition newspapers as well; among the opposition, the S.D.F. is often viewed as another proxy for the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (P.Y.D.). *‘Iṣāba* (gang) is negative and used especially by pro-opposition outlets for ISIS, the People’s Protection Units (Y.P.G.), and others depending on specific affiliation, but is also used by pro-regime sites to refer to the opposition. The terms *bawāsil* (courageous men), *abṭāl* (heroes), and *mujāhidūn* show support and favorable opinion toward those described, though the former two are more commonly used by pro-regime outlets and the latter by pro-opposition. Of course, *tuwwār* (revolutionaries) shows support for the opposition. *Muqātilūn* (combatants or fighters) is more neutral. The words used to describe deaths and military activity are also indicative. Favorable and supportive terms are *istišhād* (became a martyr) and *šahīd/šuhadā’* (martyr/s), while *qutila* (was killed), *maqtal* (death, implying killing), and *qatīl/qatīlā* ([the] dead/killed) are neutral. *Taṣfiya* (liquidation) is negative, and dehumanizes the target. A common negative description of actions is *irtakaba jarīma/jarā’im* (committed crime/s) or *majzara/majāzir* (massacre/s), whereas *tamakanna/istatā’a* (was able to, for example, was able to take back a village or a hill, or make gains) has positive connotations.



## COMMUNITY MEDIA IN PRO-REGIME AREAS

Even within regime-controlled areas, the media environment has been significantly impacted by the war. Regime-held areas have seen an explosion in the number of community media pages operating on Facebook for various neighborhoods, villages and cities. Given that stringent bureaucratic procedures still apply in government-controlled regions—new media outlets need to acquire an operating license—new forms of media have resorted to the Internet, and in particular social media such as Facebook, as a means to produce content. Thus, an online media outlet operates a Facebook page as if it were a typical news site, publishing new reports and analyses, breaking news updates, videos and images and so forth.

**“The significance of bottom-up pro-regime media means that they are mostly beyond the control of the government.”**

A non-exhaustive list (see Figure 4) of prominent pro-regime Facebook community media pages found as many as 47, including popular news sources such as *Dimashq Now*, and others focusing on various cities and

regions in the country, including Raqqa, Latakia, Daraa and Aleppo. While these pages reinforce the government’s narrative, they have become key sources of information on military movements and local incidents often not included in state media. They also represent the ‘mood’ of the communities that support the government, and thus can be viewed as a barometer of support for the regime. The mode of Facebook also means that these publications are interactive with their audiences via comments, likes, and sharing. The significance of bottom-up pro-regime media means that they are mostly beyond the control of the government, which is, at present, heavily dependent on the public support of these communities as it fights for its survival. Regime-held areas still receive regular electricity supply and Internet connectivity, rendering such pages crucial for information dissemination for local communities under regime control.

Critical reporting in pro-regime areas is fraught with risks given the violent backlash journalists may face. For example, a Syrian journalist based in the regime-stronghold of Tartus writing for *Al-Monitor* treaded with extreme



caution, including using a pseudonym, obscuring the identities of those interviewed, and discreetly reporting on issues without arousing suspicion from the local community. Nevertheless, the author was still able to produce stories that exposed discontent among pro-regime Alawite supporters in the area, including resistance to conscription to the army,<sup>17</sup> and protests over a rise in prices and general strain produced by the war.<sup>18</sup>

However, even a gradual shift toward accountable reporting is significant. One stinging example among pro-regime media was after the achievement by rebel factions in briefly breaking the government-imposed siege on eastern Aleppo in August 2016. A Facebook post on the pro-regime “Syria Corruption in the Age of Reform” page was scathing of state-run media, going as far as labelling them “traitors” for denying rebel gains in Aleppo, and providing scant coverage of this

highly newsworthy battle.<sup>19</sup> Another example among pro-regime media were concerns, or shrouded criticism, raised by a commentator in the *Damascus News*

**“Critical reporting in pro-regime areas is fraught with risks given the violent backlash journalists may face.”**

*Network* of the army’s capabilities following the sudden loss of territory in Idlib, Daraa and Palmyra in 2015.<sup>20</sup> Another was a report in *Baladna News* from April 2016 that, though largely supportive of the government’s parliamentary elections that month, included two notable criticisms: 1) that many people could not vote due to security risks, and 2) some people had expressed dissatisfaction with the candidates, and considering past parliaments have done little for the needs of citizens, it’s hard to see how this one will be any different.<sup>21</sup> Other reports have highlighted corruption in various sectors, including wheat prices and telecommunications.<sup>22</sup> Although critical reporting is dwarfed by the coverage supportive of the Syrian army and derisive of the opposition, that such criticism occurs at all is a significant undertaking and reflects a clear shift to a media environment that is more representative of the community’s views, rather

## “Even within the regime’s sphere of control, a more open media culture might survive.”

than simply a propaganda machine dominated by the regime and associated elites.

While media freedom in regime areas is still more constrained than in rebel-held areas, the new methods of media coverage brought by the war are also laying the foundations for a change in Syria’s media culture in a post-war environment. Indeed, it is not beyond the Syrian government to crack down on independent media if it were to retain power in a final settlement, but it is difficult to envision the regime targeting its own supporters, who have established a strong online media presence and have been instrumental in promoting the government’s narrative to Syrians within the country. This suggests that, even within the regime’s sphere of control, a more open media culture might survive.

## NGO ASSISTANCE AND MEDIA TRAINING

International NGOs, financed by various Western governments, have run a series of projects aimed at raising the standards of independent Syrian media, and turning citizen journalists into professional journalists. For obvious reasons, these programs have been in rebel-held areas only. The assistance has been crucial in helping to elevate the standards of independent Syrian journalism. In the words of the journalist in Aleppo:

“At the beginning, there was a need for people outside to know what was going on in Syria. Regular people were picking up mobiles and taking pictures and video. After five years and media training, now we have more professionalism. There were friends of mine who didn’t know how to turn on a camera, and now they are working with Reuters.”

Training for would-be Syrian journalists has come from a variety of sources. Some NGOs and their donors have focused on providing equipment to new media outlets, such as broadcast equipment for radio and television stations; some have focused on developing skills, from writing to videography and photography; and others have sought a more qualitative approach to improving ethics and instilling best practices. Below is a brief overview of American and European initiatives that have been effective in aiding the development of independent Syrian media.

## U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT – NEAR EASTERN AFFAIRS

As part of its non-lethal assistance grants in response to the Syrian conflict, the U.S. government set aside funds to support new Syrian media in various areas within the country, but outside the control of the Syrian government. The program, titled Support for Independent Media in Syria, was launched toward the end of 2012, and fell under the auspices of the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (C.S.O.), until it was transferred to the N.E.A. in mid-2015, where the program remains in effect. Media support was one of four categories that made up the non-lethal assistance program for Syria: 1) the development of independent media, 2) strengthening of civil society, 3) improving access to justice and accountability, and 4) providing non-lethal assistance to moderate opposition forces.<sup>23</sup> According to a former U.S. official familiar with the program, at least \$12-13 million was spent annually by C.S.O. on its media support program.<sup>24</sup> The C.S.O.'s overall program for assistance to Syria had reached a total of \$31.6 million at the time of its handover to N.E.A.<sup>25</sup>

The U.S. government saw media development in these ungoverned areas as a means to empower moderate forces and counter extremist discourse and proselytization. As one former U.S. diplomat who worked on Syria put it, “The whole point of it was to increase the strength of the moderates in areas cleared of the Syrian army, because there was this contest between extremists and more moderate elements.”<sup>26</sup> The program focused much of its assistance on providing equipment to radio networks. Due to the unavailability of Internet in rebel-held areas, radio was considered an effective medium with a wide reach to local audiences.<sup>27</sup> According to another U.S. official familiar with the program, “Many radio stations focus on Aleppo, which has become a very competitive media environment.”

The media support program currently assists seven FM radio stations that broadcast into Syria, five of which have their headquarters in Turkey, while two are based in Syria

**“There were friends of mine who didn’t know how to turn on a camera, and now they are working with Reuters.”**

(one in Idlib province, and the other in Hassakeh province).<sup>28</sup> The program also supports one television station and a production house that delivers visual content. However, as many as 13 Syrian networks have received U.S. assistance over the past five years.<sup>29</sup>

Support for these networks largely came in three forms—the supplying of equipment, fully or partially covering operational costs (including salaries), and media skills and ethics training via third-party contractors, such as Creative Associates International and Global News Intelligence.

## EUROPEAN NGOs

European governments have similarly financed Syrian media development projects initiated by European NGOs. Among the leading training programs that have ran at different junctures over the past five years include those conducted by the Dutch-based NGO Free Press Unlimited (F.P.U.), BBC Media Action, Canal France Internationale, the German-based Media in Cooperation & Transition (M.I.C.T.), and the Italian-based Coordinamento delle Organizzazioni per il Servizio Volontario (COSV).

While training programs have at times overlapped between the various organizations, they mostly complement one another as they target different skillsets. For example, F.P.U. run a training program specifically aimed at ethics and improving journalistic standards, titled Ethical Journalism for Syria. Unlike other programs, the Dutch NGO does not work with individuals, but with media organizations to improve their professionalism, organizational structure and reporting. F.P.U.’s work emphasizes critical reporting and accountability among Syrian media. It does not work with media organizations affiliated with the Syrian government, but, according to an F.P.U. director, “We are promoting an inclusive dialogue. The focus is the profession, not whether you’re pro-regime or not.”<sup>30</sup> F.P.U. has worked with at least 20 Syrian media organizations, including umbrella networks such as the Syrian Journalists Association.

COSV, on the other hand, has run a series of media training workshops in Lebanon and Turkey, welcoming individual would-be

**“As many as 13 Syrian networks have received U.S. assistance over the past five years.”**

Syrian journalists, to develop technical skills. Participants were able to select from four training options—writing, videography, photography and audio. At least 25 Syrian journalists have been trained through COSV’s program.<sup>31</sup>

“The focus is the profession, not whether you’re pro-regime or not.”

## CHALLENGES FOR MEDIA TRAINING PROGRAMS

### ACCESS

Under pressure from Western powers to stem the flow of jihadists across its border into Syria, Turkey moved to close its border in March 2015.<sup>32</sup> The indirect consequence, however, has been the severe hampering of media training programs that had operated in southern Turkey for several years. Turkey had previously pursued an open border policy that enabled Syrian-based journalists in rebel- and Kurdish-held areas along the Turkish border to cross the frontier with greater ease. As such, many Western-backed NGO media training programs were held in the southern Turkish city of Gaziantep.

Both journalists and NGOs have cited Turkey’s border closure as a serious impediment to their current work. Not only has training become inaccessible for those journalists still based in Syria, but the transfer of essential equipment to media organizations has also been hampered.

Also, Lebanon’s increased tightening of its border with the imposition of visa restrictions on Syrians for the first time in January 2015—Syrians were previously allowed to enter Lebanon visa-free—has made it difficult for Syrian-based journalists to attend training sessions that were held in Lebanon. Additionally, the Syrian border regions surrounding Lebanon are mostly regime-held, thus the movement of independent journalists back-and-forth between Syria and Lebanon had always been a riskier endeavor when compared to Turkey.

The increased restrictions on movement for independent journalists based in Syria has prompted NGOs to reassess their approach. F.P.U., for example, says it will expand its virtual training program for Syrians who cannot travel abroad, and focus its effort on developing Syrian trainers within Syria, providing them with the necessary tools to facilitate in-country workshops.

## FUNDING

As the war heads into a sixth year, there are concerns among some NGOs and Syrian journalists that international, in particular Western, funding for non-violent initiatives, such as media development, are declining. Indeed, NGO representatives and U.S. officials, former and current, interviewed for this paper understood that funding was originally envisioned to be short-term for media programs, ranging from 12-18 months. There was no long-term commitment to emerging Syrian media from the outset. As one former U.S. diplomat explained, the idea was to provide “seed money” for independent Syrian media, who would then become self-sufficient over time. But as the conflict dragged on, and the situation was not suitable for new media outlets to thrive as self-sustaining businesses, some programs have been extended, while others have been revised and/or cut.

The U.S. government has, thus far, decided to revise its approach from short-term to long-term assistance for Syrian media development, and reshuffled

**“Both journalists and NGOs have cited Turkey’s border closure as a serious impediment to their current work.”**

its bureaucratic handling of the project accordingly. The U.S. State Department’s decision to transfer its media assistance program from C.S.O. to N.E.A. was largely a reflection of this change

of assessment. N.E.A. is likely to be more capable of handling such a project over the long-term, and guaranteed greater stability for the program as N.E.A. is closer to the Congressional procurement process than C.S.O.<sup>33</sup>

Italian government funding for Syrian media development, however, has reached its expiration, which has yet to be extended or renewed by the Italian foreign ministry. F.P.U.’s program has long-term stability, because of backing from the Swedish government, which has committed to another five years, and increased funds from the Dutch government.

Nevertheless, the inconsistency of funding has been acutely felt on the recipients’ end. A director at Raya FM said funding from Creative Associates International had been abruptly halted this year, prompting staff to work on



a volunteer basis as the station is now no longer able to afford salaries. The journalist in Aleppo, who works with a number of Syrian-based journalists out of a local media center, also said the team works voluntarily and is in need of funding. It is essential for new media outlets to be able to hire staff and pay salaries in order to fully transition emerging Syrian media from citizen and activist journalism to a recognizable profession.

## LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS MODELS

While, in an ideal environment, new Syrian media outlets would have transitioned by now to more sustainable business models, the prolongation of the war has denied these outlets the necessary economic climate required to build such models. Most independent Syrian media outlets are currently based outside of the country, and are unable to distribute or sell a significant number of newspapers, or entice investors. In addition, given financial support for humanitarian relief for Syrians affected by the war is already well-below the required sum, private donors prefer to send their money to such efforts rather than to media. These challenges were aptly described by a director at one Syrian outlet that has tried to develop revenue streams beyond donor assistance:

**“There was no long-term commitment to emerging Syrian media from the outset.”**

“Our main office and main operations is based in Istanbul, and it’s very hard to get revenue from the ads that we put in the newspaper. We’re not selling our newspaper, we’re getting support to distribute for free in Syria. This won’t change until we go back to Syria and operate as a normal media outlet. We’ve tried crowdsourcing--not much interest. Supporters of the Syrian cause prefer to give money to the food basket; there’s not much interest in media initiatives.”

Extended funding is, thus, required for these media outlets to continue their operations until a complete cessation of violence. As one NGO representative remarked:

“Coming from an approach of bottom-up, you need time, which no one grants because donors want results immediately. To produce a small generation of critical thinkers, which will be part of the future media landscape, you need time.”

## DUPLICATION OF PROGRAMS AND INADEQUATE TRAINING

There is currently little-to-no coordination between American and European efforts to develop Syrian media. One former U.S. official said this was deliberate to avoid any complications or conflicts that may delay their efforts. However, it is not uncommon for Syrian media outlets to receive assistance from both European and American donors and NGOs.

While the result has been additional layers of support for Syrian media outlets, the lack of a cluster means that potential areas of support are being overlooked, and duplication may be occurring. As a result, Syrian journalists with various independent outlets interviewed for this paper have said training exercises

**“Supporters of the Syrian cause prefer to give money to the food basket; there’s not much interest in media initiatives.”**

have not entirely been beneficial, or applicable in their situations. One Syrian journalist, for example, urged training on improving editorial management and

internal structuring of a media organization to improve efficiency. Such training services may indeed be available, as reflected in F.P.U.’s programs, but recipients are potentially being overlooked or missed in the identification process. The challenge in connecting targeted recipients with appropriate NGOs and programs suited to their needs could be overcome with clearer coordination, in the form of a cluster, among NGOs working on media development.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### I. CONTINUE FUNDING

While the State Department has acknowledged that support for Syrian media is now a long-term matter, and has adjusted its bureaucracy accordingly, other Western governments have allowed their short-term support to lapse, resulting in a sudden halt to certain projects. It is essential that donors continue to finance



media development, and place realistic timeframes as to when they expect independent Syrian media to be self-sustainable. Media outlets are unable to produce revenue-raising business models while the war is ongoing, thus donors should be prepared to finance such projects until a peace agreement has been reached.

Funding independent Syrian media is not a controversial measure, and should be supported by all sides of politics as an essential non-violent investment in the social democratization of Syria.

## II. FORM CLUSTER OF NGOs SUPPORTING MEDIA

U.S. officials interviewed in this paper spoke of the preference of the U.S. government to pursue a ‘go-it-alone’ approach when it came to assisting Syrian media. As stated earlier, this can result in a duplication of efforts, a failure to identify targeted journalists and organizations, inconsistent funding to media outlets, and inadequate training that do not address the direct needs of the supposed beneficiary. A cluster—either headed by the United Nations or a lead NGO—can direct assistance to where it is needed, prevent duplication, ensure a consistency of support for emerging media outlets and produce greater efficiency not only in terms of support, but in the output of the media outlets.

## III. REVISE TURKEY BORDER RESTRICTIONS

Combating ISIS and other jihadist groups does require stronger action from Turkey in how it manages its long border with Syria. However, the complete closure has hampered efforts within Syria to fight extremism. Independent Syrian media serves as a crucial bulwark against extremist ideology and proselytization, and this needs to be empowered, not constrained. Exemptions need to be provided to Syrian journalists working with established media—i.e. independent outlets supported by Western-backed NGOs, and journalists working with international media—to continue training programs in southern Turkey, and permit the transfer of essential media equipment.

## IV. INCLUDE PROTECTIONS FOR MEDIA IN PEACE NEGOTIATIONS AND MAKE PRESS FREEDOM A REQUIREMENT FOR SUPPORTING REBEL GROUPS

Peace talks to resolve the Syrian war must include commitments from all armed parties to respect press freedom, not close newly established independent media outlets, and provide the necessary licenses for new outlets and accreditation for new journalists who have entered the field. This is particularly incumbent on the Syrian government, which already oversees the institutions responsible for licensing domestic media. A political transition deal ought to include an overhaul of the bureaucratic mechanisms that award media licenses to ensure all new media applicants, be they independent media or pro-regime Facebook community pages, are granted licenses to operate.

External assistance to armed rebel groups should include contingencies to respect press freedom. Many Syrian journalists in these areas today practice self-censorship to avoid the wrath of certain armed factions. This may not have a widespread impact, particularly since Western powers have zero leverage over powerful radical jihadist groups, such as the formerly al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. However, the presence of some groups on the ground that are willing to protect journalists and their freedom to work will at least create some spaces for independent media to flourish without fear of retribution.

## V. CONSOLIDATE MEDIA OUTLETS

The vast number of new Syrian media outlets has made it difficult for donors and NGOs to target assistance, scattered media geographically and is an obstacle to creating formidable independent media with national recognition and reach. New Syrian media over the past few years have gone through a process of consolidation, or a ‘survival of the fittest.’ Donor funding and NGO assistance can aid in the consolidation to ensure that, by the end of the war, several capable, staffed, and equipped independent Syrian media outlets will survive and become a permanent fixture in post-war Syria’s media landscape.

Traditional independent media within Syria and online media based outside the country should begin exploring partnerships and mergers to consolidate their operations and increase their chances of survival.

## VI. SUPPORT INDEPENDENT MEDIA TO PREVENT OLIGOPOLIES POST-CONFLICT

Continued funding of independent Syrian media is also crucial to enable them to compete in the post-conflict environment. The transition to democracy is dependent on a diverse media. This will suffer should Syrian media post-war be dominated by powerful oligarchs and conglomerates, as seen in the 2000s when private media was almost entirely owned by businessmen associated with the Ba’athist regime. As Morris writes:

“where the media fails to act as an effective civic forum, this can hinder democratic consolidation... State ownership and control of the primary broadcasting channels is one important issue, but threats to media pluralism are also raised by over-concentration of private ownership of the media... the quality of democracy still remains limited where state ownership of television has been replaced by private oligopolies and crony capitalism.”<sup>34</sup>

## VII. FORMATION OF A SYRIAN JOURNALIST UNION

A key building block for a new media culture are umbrella organizations that set national standards for journalists, particularly in terms of ethics, aims and objectives, and conduct. Several organizations have already been established, such as the Syrian Journalists’ Association and the Ethical Charter for Syrian Media Alliance. A union should also be created to represent new Syrian journalists that have entered the profession in the past five years; provide them with accreditation that recognizes them as journalists internationally; and ensure their collective voice is heard at the negotiating table. International recognition of a union, in particular the accreditation of journalists, increases the chance of imposing a *fait accompli* on the Syrian government to recognize the new body, and the changing media landscape.

**“The transition to democracy is dependent on a diverse media.”**

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