THE NEW SYRIAN PRESS
Appraisal, challenges and outlook

Study carried out by Soazig DOLLET for CFI in September 2015

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Upon taking up the reins of power in 1963, the Ba’ath party imposed a state of emergency and turned Syria into a single-party state. Hafez Al-Assad’s military coup in 1970 reinforced the authoritarian system that was already in place. Fundamental freedoms are systematically flouted and the population has been made subject to constant surveillance.

The government uses the media to consolidate and increase its control, outlawing all communications that deviate from the singular Ba’athist ideology. Only government-backed media outlets are authorised to operate: a press agency (the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)), a television channel, a radio station and three newspapers. At local level, each of the 14 governorates has its own radio station and newspaper, which are controlled by the local governors. They all broadcast the authorities’ propaganda.

The first media revolution took place in 1995 with the introduction of satellite, opening a window to the world for Syrians. Following the death of Hafez Al-Assad, under the pretence of relaxing restrictions and promoting openness, the first private media organisations were permitted. However, they were placed under virtually total state control, and only those close to the palace are able to gain access. The second major change was the arrival of the Internet. But once again, service providers are companies that are run by or affiliated to the government. On account of the blocking of websites, the monitoring of Internet use and the tracking of correspondence, Syrians wishing to access freely available, non-censored information have been forced to get around censorship by other methods, which are not readily accessible to the uninitiated.

In 2010, immediately prior to the Arab Spring, Syria was ranked 173rd out of 178 in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index. Bashar Al-Assad appeared on the organisation’s list of Predators of Press Freedom, and the country featured among the Enemies of the Internet³.

The start of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt caused the security services to tighten their control over all of the media. In March 2011, peaceful protests in Syria were violently repressed and militants were arrested.

The few independent journalists remaining in Syria at the time were either arrested or killed. The rest have gone into exile. From May-June 2011, visas for foreign journalists became extremely difficult to get hold of. Activists and ordinary people overcome their fear and took to the streets, armed with their mobile telephones and cameras, to document the gatherings and their repression. As information activists, they were systematically targeted. In the absence of professional Syrian or foreign journalists, they were able to produce content on the ground that was sent to media channels all around the world. Media networks, committees and other centres were set up. Each city had at least one ‘media office’. At one time, Aleppo had about 10 media agencies. In September 2013 Jameel Salou, the founding journalist of the Free Syria News Agency (FSNA), announced that the city of Raqqa had no less than 39 civilian media offices. Very quickly, the first ‘free’ media started to materialise. Watan FM began broadcasting in summer 2011 in various districts of the capital and the first editions of Souriatna were distributed in late September in Damascus. A few months later, militants from Al-Zabadani and Darayya launched Oxygen and Enab Baladi, respectively.

We are witnessing the emergence of a new generation of media figures in Syria: citizen-journalists – mainly men aged 18–30. “There are women, of course, but their numbers have been falling”, lamented Lina Chawaf in November 2013, head of programmes at Radio Rozana at the time. Most have no formal training in journalism. Some already have careers, some have had a university education, others not, some have money, others have none. “It wasn’t a matter of social class or cultural background”, said Chawaf.

The government-run media outlets continue to use rhetoric labelling the protestors as terrorists who are trying to destabilise the country. Meanwhile, the authorities are tightening their control over the Internet, aware of the fact that it serves as a means of expression, a space for publishing information aimed at Syrians and the international audience, and a tool for mobilising and organising civil society. Arrests by the security services and the Shabiha are becoming a daily occurrence.

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The militarisation of the conflict has resulted in a *de facto* division of the country, between one region controlled by the regular army and another, in the north, under the control of the Free Syrian Army. A wide range of media initiatives have emerged across all formats: newspapers, radio stations, websites and televisions are springing up from everywhere. Owing to the instability of the situation on the ground, most have decided to base themselves outside of Syrian territory. Turkey quickly became the rear base of these new media outlets, with Gaziantep serving as a hub. The country is an attractive location, not only for its geographical proximity to the so-called ‘free’ regions in the north of Syria, but also due to the policies of the Lebanese, Jordanian and Egyptian governments5, which stand as an impediment to the pursuit of activities supporting the Syrian revolution in those countries.

Generally speaking, these media outlets primarily act as a bulwark against Damascus propaganda, while at the same time criticising the Syrian opposition and Free Syrian Army. Mostly run by citizen-journalists without formal training in the principles of journalism, they often use revolutionary rhetoric, free from any semblance of objectivity, neutrality or impartiality. This is evident from the choice of vocabulary and the tone and visual identity utilised. In their attempts to cast themselves as fully in opposition, these ‘revolutionary media’ (unconsciously) mimic the approach of the regime they are standing against, establishing the dialectic of ‘if you’re not with us, you’re against us’. In April 2013 a Syrian journalist announced, “It is impossible to be independent nowadays. You cannot – and simply should not – be so”. There are exceptions, of course, but many now see themselves as ‘guardians of the revolution’, and endeavour to communicate the ‘reality on the ground’ to the world, free from the ‘clichés’ deployed by the foreign media. In April 2013 a trainer noted that “many confuse revolution with journalism”7.

In the absence of ‘neutral’ foreign observers on the ground, alongside the physical war government-run (or -affiliated) media outlets and new media organisations are waging an information and disinformation war.

In addition, the image of and work carried out by citizen-journalists, and more generally by civilians engaged in information-supplying activities, are distorted by the involvement of combatants and their spokespersons in this information war. Each armed group has its own ‘media team’ composed of at least one photographer/cameraman tasked with filming the warfare and uploading the images to Facebook and/or YouTube. The aim is not only to document the conflict, but also to attract funding from potential financial backers.

More recently, the revolutionary fever has waned. “These citizen-journalists have become increasingly professional and the quality of the content they produce has improved greatly. Some have acquired journalism skills; particularly in response to the needs of Arab and international news broadcasters”, said journalist Hala Kodmani at the Institut du Monde arabe in Paris on 9 October 2013. This increase in professionalism is also the result of training sessions held by various NGOs. “Media activism has become a source of income for many young people, a way of earning a living. Many work for both international and local news organisations”, added Ms Kodmani.

The proliferation of armed groups, the emergence and subsequent expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and the unilateral proclamation of autonomy in the three cantons with a majority population of Syrian Kurds along the Turkish-Syrian border (known as Rojava, or Western Kurdistan) in November 20138 have led to the dividing-up of the far corners of the territory, with borders constantly moving and alliances being forged and dissolved on the basis of where interests lie. These different groups attempt to impose their law on the population residing in the territory they are trying to rule. Armed with their own media, they also seek to control the work carried out by independent journalists. Rules are arbitrary and abuse is common. The moralisation of society is making the work of independent journalists, in particular women, more difficult every day. The al-Nusra Front’s consolidation of power in the north of the country since late 2014 has resulted in the exile of a third wave of information activists. These security issues are compounded by deficiencies in equipment and technical faults, such as power cuts and the lack of land-based Internet.

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5 Since the military coup of July 2013
More than four years since it first broke out, the general consensus is that the conflict is set to continue and that the media have a role to play. But what is this role? This study aims to give a concise overview of the new Syrian press. By analysing the difficulties faced by such publications on a daily basis, we will learn about the challenges they currently face with a view to identifying the best ways of addressing future action areas. A number of points to consider have been outlined, both for newspapers and magazines, and for the organisations working to support them and their financial backers.
**Section 1 – A brief and concise overview of the new written press in Syria**

1) **A few figures**

Since the uprising broke out in March 2011, there has been a veritable explosion in the number of paper publications, signalling greater freedom of expression after nearly 40 years of dictatorship. According to the *Enab Baladi* study published in March 2015, 268 publications (newspapers and magazines) have been launched since March 2011, and in early 2015 61 were still in existence, i.e. 23% of the total.\footnote{http://www.enabbaladi.org/archives/32670} The earliest publications began to appear in July 2011, and December of that year saw the first closure. In the first year after the uprising (March 2011 – February 2012) 29 new publications made an appearance, with four closing. In the second year (March 2012 – February 2013) the rate at which new publications were being created increased to 108 titles – although 47 ceased to be printed. From March 2013 to February 2014, trends were reversed, and there were more closures (106) than launches (87). In the course of the next year, there were 29 new publications – a return to initial levels – but there were still more closures (35), and the forecast is that this trend will be confirmed over the next year: new titles will undoubtedly appear, but there will be an increasing number that will disappear. Indeed, certain publications have ceased to appear since the study was published.

Practically all these new publications are weeklies (26%), or appear fortnightly (24%) or on a monthly basis (27%). 57% are described as magazines and 37% as newspapers. 11 children’s magazines have been launched, as opposed to five publications targeting women.

Despite the fact that around 105 publications have no precise geographic origin, the main regions covered by such publications are Greater Damascus (11%), Aleppo (10%), Idlib (7.5%), Damascus (6.7%), Deir ez-Zor (6%) and Homs (5.6%). The regions where publication figures have been lowest are Quneitra, Al-Suwayda, Daraa, and the coastal strip, with fewer than five publications each.

2) **Building up a press sector and enhancing levels of professionalism**

a) *Initiatives by exiled volunteer militants*

Most publications were launched by militants, with no previous experience of written-press journalism. They were often students or university graduates, with many belonging to civil-society movements demanding democratic reforms.

What is it that motivates them? Many say that they wanted to set up these newspapers because there were no publications carrying information on the conflict. For Jawad Abdul Muna, from *Souriatna*, which was launched in September 2011, it was primarily a desire to offer an alternative to the government media and to provide the impetus for a new media generation in Syria. “What was needed was another angle on what was happening, an objective view and one based on what was actually going on and was independent of the coverage provided by the government media or those of the revolution”, added Najj Jirif, one of the founders of *Henta*, launched in July 2012. Diab Sreih’s intention, when he co-founded *Tamaddon* in June 2013, was to “give civil society a voice”. For certain publications targeting principally the population in the predominantly Kurdish region in the north east of the country, such as *Nû Dem or Fanous*, the desire was also to defend a particular identity after decades of discrimination of Kurdish people in Syria and the ban on use of the Kurdish language.\footnote{http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/10/syria-first-kurdish-language-newspaper-20131013124859345177.html}

Financed by members of the editorial teams from their own resources, initial publications were launched before Syria became territorially fragmented. They continued to be printed and distributed in areas subsequently described as “government-controlled territories”. The staff on these newspapers were fully aware of the risks they were running, but continued to work “underground”, gathering information and also printing and distributing clandestinely. Publications produced in this way included *Souriatna* in Damascus, *Enab Baladi* in Daraya, *Oxygen* in Al-Zabadani in early 2012, *Henta* in Al-Salamiyah and *Dawda* in Al-Suwayda in
spring 2013. *Tlena ‘Al-Hurreyyah*, a publication from local coordination committees, was launched in February 2012, and is printed and distributed locally in various governorates by those committees. Others were later published in what were, for a time, described as the “free” zones in the north or east of the country, such as *Al-Masar Al-Hurr* in Manbij, *Zaiton* in Saraqib, *Al-Gherbal* in Kafr Nabli, and *‘Ayn Al-Madina* in Deir ez-Zor.

For reasons of security and logistics, practically all editorial teams have since left Syria. Some teams immediately set up their operations in Turkey, with some spending time in Lebanon before seeking refuge in Turkish territory. There are a few exceptions, however: the *Al-Gherbal* team, for which all editorial and printing activities remained in Syria until July 2015 and which still retains an office in Kafr Nabli; the weekly *Hibr* in Aleppo, Douma’s daily *Al-Khabar*, and the very recent monthly, *Karkabeh*, in Daraya. A few titles, meanwhile, are printed in the Al-Jazira/Hassakah region, such as *Büyer Press* or *Welat*.

Numerous initiatives have emerged in Turkey, such as Absi Smesem’s *Sada Al-Sham*, launched in late June 2013, which enables this editor-in-chief to continue the work he started with *Jarida Al-Sham*, then supported by Sham News Network, or *Koluna Soryyoun* (February 2014), the editor-in-chief, Bassam Youssef, of which has been living in exile since December 2012. Then there is *Hermel* (October 2014) in Urfa the entire editorial team of which hails from Raqqa and the specialist infographics magazine, *Ayn Infographic*. Nearly all these publications are currently unlicensed in Turkey, since that country’s press code requires a licence to be obtained to the effect that the editor-in-chief holds Turkish nationality.

All these editorial teams have retained a network of correspondents in the field, either locally or at a more national level, and also in Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt. Freelance journalists work with various media.

Most of these publications are now run by men, the notable exception being the *Jasmine Syria* women’s magazine, the *Tlena ‘Al-Hurreyyah* journal and the weekly *Enab Baladi*, with its all-female executive board. Although women can be found as members of editorial teams, it is rare for them to hold managerial positions. In the field, there are few female correspondents and their numbers are tending to diminish in terms of the number of people currently involved in news and information gathering in Syria.

*b) Pluralism and creativity*

The Syrian press landscape is, however, far from being featureless and uniform: different publications target different audiences and editorial aspects differ.

Although certain publications, such as *Sada Al-Sham*, have what might be termed national ambitions, many focus, in fact, on a local readership simply because they have difficulty distributing to a wider audience. Whilst *Enab Baladi* focuses more on those living in Damascus and its surrounding area, the “government-controlled regions” are an important proportion of the target readership for the monthly *Henta* (in addition to the “free” zones), just like *Dawda*, which concentrates principally on populations in the south of Syria (Al-Suwayda, Daraa and Quneitra). According to Rami Sweid, although the monthly *Al-Gherbal* adopts a generalist editorial line, the focus is more on current events around Idlib and Aleppo. *‘Ayn Al-Madina* has long focused its attention on the Deir ez-Zor region, although it is no longer distributed there owing to the ISIS presence. As for bilingual Kurdish/Arabic publications, such as *Nû Dem* and *Fanous*, for a period, these focused principally on populations living in Syria’s predominantly Kurdish regions, such as ‘Afrin, Kobani/‘Ayn Al-‘Arab or Al-Jazira/Hassakeh, as is currently the case with the fortnightly *Büyer* and monthly *Welat*.

The differences in editorial line of these publications also ought to be emphasised. Although certain newspapers are highly political, e.g. *Koluna Soryyoun*, which publishes mainly opinion articles, others, such as *Tamaddon* or *Suwar*, have a more “radical human rights” content. A large majority is made up of newspapers mainly focusing on social issues, as is the case of *Enab Baladi* or *Souriatna*. At its launch in late 2012, *Al-Gherbal* saw its role more as that of monitoring the opposition’s military and civil institutions, but by September 2014 had become a social magazine in the wake *inter alia* of pressure and threats from extremists, according to Rami Sweid. There are also society magazines, such as *Shar*, which focuses on the life of people living in the Kurdish regions, or *Saydet Souria*, which targets women “irrespective of their religious persuasion, ethnic origin

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11 The two publications have since closed.
or political affiliation”, stresses Mohamed Mallak, its editor-in-chief. Reem Halap says that the women’s magazine *Jasmine Syria* was launched in October 2012 to focus on the place of women in Syrian society, be they working women or housewives. The bi-monthly *Hermel* tackles culture, particularly poetry, and also addresses political and economic issues. Others have chosen children’s publications, for example those in the Nai network, and the magazine *Ghiras*. Whether directly or indirectly, many publications see their role as that of combating sectarianism and the classification of the conflict and of society in terms of religion.

A number of observers attest to a genuinely pluralistic press offering and true diversity. The journalist Hala Kodmani stresses “the creativity of the new Syrian newspapers in terms of covering current affairs in Syria from original angles”. Attention should be drawn to the significant progress achieved by the various publications since their launch in terms of content and quality. Indeed, one should not lose sight of the fact that most of them were launched only three years ago. Nevertheless, there are those, such as Yazan Badran, a Syrian researcher currently working on a study for International Media Support into the Syrian press, who point to a certain homogenisation of content and language used.

The project leader of the European Union Delegation to Syria, which finances several media projects, believes there is a need for more studies, in particular on the Syrian media landscape and on the audience, in order to give a (general) answer to the issue of whether the new media are genuinely pluralistic in nature, and on their reach. “The European Union is currently funding a study in this area, which is designed to be as inclusive as possible and to ensure the most rigorous methodology is followed”.

c) Increasing teams’ professionalism and structuring the sector

Because of Syria’s security situation, as well as that of a number of other countries in the region (Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt), most of the editorial teams of these publications are now based in either Gaziantep or Istanbul in Turkey. Regardless of how close they are to Syria in geographical terms, a large part of their work depends on a network of correspondents on the ground.

- **A lack of professionalism**

The teams, initially composed mostly of militants with no journalistic experience whatsoever, are also becoming more professional. Whether they are based currently in Turkey or rely on correspondents still in Syria, those involved in news and information have now received training in different fields, for example ethics, codes of practice and basic principles of journalism, journalistic writing techniques, Internet media editing, etc. Specific workshops have been organised for editors-in-chief, to enable them to be trained in the techniques of managing an editorial team. Technical modules, dealing with pagination, headlines and iconography, have also been provided. Despite the fact that training courses connected with digital security have not been crowned with success, others have enabled news and information professionals to gain insights and/or to enhance their knowledge. Some of those who in 2012-2013 were described as “citizen-journalists” have become genuine journalists.

The desire for higher levels of professionalism is as much an individual quest for improvement in practices on the part of the Syrian journalists trained as an aspiration to progress within their chosen media. Such professional aspirations appear progressively to have come more to the forefront as compared with the political and activist dimension, which in the past was often the driving force for those taking part in the training courses organised in the immediate aftermath of the uprising.

Many organisations have supported and continue to support the new Syrian written press. Initially, the main two institutions were the Association for the Support of Free Media (ASML) and the Syrian NGO Basma. Basma was created in early 2012 by the Qatari-British company Access Research Knowledge, better known by its acronym ARK, to – officially – support the emerging written press sector. Active until late 2013, Basma supported eight newspapers, particularly by providing training courses.

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12 Study due to be published by the end of 2015.
13 [https://www.facebook.com/medialibre.fr](https://www.facebook.com/medialibre.fr)
15 ARK did not respond to the request for an interview extended on 11 June.
Meanwhile, ASML, which describes itself as providing support for “enablers”, the stated aim being to promote the emergence and development of true media pluralism in Syria, and SMART, its partner organisation in Syria, have also set up media training programmes that they have supported and still support, in addition to providing a monthly subsidy\(^\text{16}\) and paying for printing and distribution in Syria. In total, 19 newspapers have received support since 2011. Since January 2015, the organisation has been promoting children’s publications for the “Nai” network\(^\text{17}\). However, ASML is currently reviewing its media-support policy\(^\text{18}\).

Besides Basma and ASML, a number of institutions actively support training in the written press sector. In that regard, since 2012 the European Union has backed several projects, either through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights or under the European Neighbourhood Policy, with a view to enhancing and reinforcing the skills of the new Syrian media, in particular in the area of complying with journalistic rules and increasing teams’ professionalism. The EU Member States have also provided support. A number of operators, for instance CFI, Internews, Free Press Unlimited, Reporters Without Borders, IREX, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, International Media Support, etc., have also developed programmes aimed at strengthening the professional skills of collaborators of these publications.

Moreover, significant internal restructuring work has been undertaken by the editorial teams towards becoming fully fledged media organisations. Whilst, at the time of their launch, the majority of people worked on a voluntary basis, this is no longer the case today since there has been an influx of funds from donors, which helps to secure the future for these media.

However, the impact of such training courses is limited owing to the disappearance of certain titles, editorial staff turnover and also increasing difficulties encountered by the media in attracting their field correspondents to attend and take part in training sessions run in Turkey. In addition to this is the fact that publications present only in Syria are, to an extent, somewhat outside of programmes set up by international organisations.

Nowadays, training needs have evolved. Although it is important to continue to place emphasis on basic principles of journalism owing, in particular, to the rate of turnover within certain editorial teams, many media nevertheless still express the need for more training in situ, with a view to strengthening their in-house organisational skills and assistance in addressing their readership. “Specialist” training courses are also needed in the fields of infographic techniques, producing online content and also creating a stronger Internet presence.

- Towards a structuring of the written-press sector?

Various collaborative and networking initiatives have come into being. The Syrian Network for Prints (SNP) was launched in mid-2014\(^\text{19}\). At the outset, it covered five publications, namely: *Sada Al-Sham*, *Enab Baladi*, *Tamaddun*, *Koluna Soryoun* and *Souriatna*. Since July 2015, *‘Ayn Al-Madina* and *Zaiton* have joined the network. This Syrian initiative, supported by CFI and International Media Support, was born of the awareness that “everyone would be stronger if everyone were united”, according to Diab Srieih of *Tamaddon*. Jawwad Shorbaji, *Enab Baladi* editor-in-chief, stresses that “each newspaper has specific aspects. Everyone collaborates but everyone is an individual. No one wants to be just like everyone else. The important thing is that the public should have access to a diverse range of titles”. Lately, the various editorial teams have been addressing a single topic together, even speaking with one voice in the face of bans on distribution issued against a number of publications, as in the case of the Charlie Hebdo affair in January 2015 and, more recently, when the authorities at the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing (controlled by Ahrar Al-Sham Al-Islamiya) prohibited the distribution of a number of publications.\(^\text{20}\) Moreover, a number of SNP publications have signed a so-called non-competition clause whereby if a journalist working for one of the network’s titles wishes to work for another under the SNP the editors-in-chief concerned have to be notified and come to an agreement on the matter.

\(^{16}\) The monthly subsidy is, on average, EUR 1000, although the publication that is considered to be the best receives EUR 3000 per month.

\(^{17}\) [http://www.naisyria.org/](http://www.naisyria.org/)

\(^{18}\) Pending at the time of writing this report (15 June 2015).

\(^{19}\) [http://www.alaraby.co.uk/medianews/2014/11/5/1020211345](http://www.alaraby.co.uk/medianews/2014/11/5/1020211345)

A second networking project was set up in December 2014 under the name of “Tahalouf Daw” (Alliance of the Light)\textsuperscript{21}, bringing together the magazines Dawda, Saydet Souria, Henta and the new teen publication Hentawi\textsuperscript{22}, and also the bilingual Kurdish/Arabic magazine Shar.

A network of publications for children, “Nai”\textsuperscript{23} (Arabic acronym for “Club for children and adolescents of Syria”), also recently came into being. It comprises six titles: Zaiton wa Zaitoneh, Zaouraq, Tayaret Waraq, Quz Qazah, Tin Ba’el and Sourounou.

3) Printing and distribution

a) Printing

Generally speaking, at the outset newspapers printed 1000 copies, but that number is now 3000 or even 7000 copies per issue. For security and logistical reasons, many publications are printed in Turkey before distribution in northern Syria. Nevertheless, organisations such as SMART have chosen to print in Syria in order to be as close as possible to distribution points and to not be dependent on crossing points on the Turkey/Syria border. Other media have chosen the combination of the two options (Syria and Turkey) in order to maximise their distribution.

In areas controlled by the government or under siege, it is extremely difficult to acquire paper and ink. The print quality is thus lower, the format different and the use of colour rarely current. For obvious security reasons, small quantities are printed and distribution is clandestine. According to Mohamed Mallak, the Saydet Souria office in Eastern Ghouta is responsible for printing and distributing the women’s magazine in this besieged area. The monthly Dawda is printed and distributed in Al-Suwayda in particular, and also in Daraa. Naji ijrf reported that 5000 copies of his monthly Henta were directly printed in Syria thanks to local offices in Idlib, Aleppo, Daraa, Salamiyah, Damascus and Tartus. Until January 2015, SMART was printing certain ASML-supported publications in black and white, for distribution in Ghouta. The weekly Souriatna, meanwhile, was being distributed in small numbers in the southern suburbs of Damascus and in Western Ghouta until August 2014.

b) Structuring distribution networks in the north

From a system based on personal relationships, distribution has progressively become more organised and structured. A number of networks have come into existence in the north of the country, the self-proclaimed Rojava region under PYD (Democratic Union Party) control for the time being remaining outside of these networks\textsuperscript{24}.

With a view to progressing from a distribution system that is predominantly local owing to a lack of resources, ASML has proposed to various publications it used to support that they take over – using SMART PRINT HOUSE – not only the printing of their issues in Syria but also their distribution within the country. In this way, it has been possible for newspapers to be distributed in regions they would be unable to reach alone and as a result they have gained a higher profile. This practice has had a material impact on the content of certain newspapers, with editorial teams becoming aware that their readership is not restricted solely to regions where they were hitherto customarily distributed. Chamsy Sarkis explains that although Al-Masar Al-Hurr and Zaiton chose to keep to solely local distribution, others, “triggered by distribution”, have adapted their editorial line in order to be able to cater for a more “national” readership.

The seven SNP publications, and also three other publications supported by IMS, are printed in Adana, in Turkey. A private company moves 5000 copies of each newspaper to twenty distribution points in Syria, from where they are then re-despatched. In total, there are around 400 SNP distribution points in the north of Syria. 2000 copies of each title are also distributed in Turkey (in Istanbul, Gaziantep, Antakya, Killis, Mersin, Urfa and

\textsuperscript{21} In June 2015, this network still existed only on paper, owing to lack of funding, according to Mohamed Mallak.

\textsuperscript{22} The first issue of which was to be published in June 2015.

\textsuperscript{23} \url{http://www.naisyria.org/}

\textsuperscript{24} June 2015
Joint distribution networks were set up in August 2014 and, according to the editors-in-chief, the distribution network has been improved on an ongoing basis in order better to meet peoples’ expectations. “By virtue of this network, circulation has increased from 1000 to 7000 printed copies, plus we are now distributing in places we were previously unable to reach”, according to Jawwad Shorbaji. In parallel, and up until January 2015, the ASML-supported SNP newspapers were also printed and distributed by SMART. As for Koluna Soryyoun, this bimonthly was printing and distributing 1000 additional copies up until February 2015. The initiative ended due to a lack of financial resources. Nowadays, it is distributed only by the SNP.

However, there are many publications that distribute outside of these distribution networks. This is the case of the distribution of Henta, which is the task of the newspaper’s offices in the country, and also of Saydet Souria and Dawda. Jasmine Syria, which is printed in Gaziantep, has around forty distribution points in the north of the country. Until July 2015, the 3000 monthly copies of Al-Gherbal were printed in Aleppo before being distributed in the regions of Aleppo, Idlib and Rif Hama (north). Al-Gherbal was also distributed in Turkey: every month, 200 newspapers were given to one person travelling to Gaziantep and Reyhanlı. Thus, Turkey’s closure of the border from March 2015 was a real handicap in terms of the distribution of its magazine in Turkey. Since July 2015, Al-Gherbal has been printed in Turkey – three-quarters of its 4000 copies are distributed in Syria, the rest remaining in Turkey.

The situation in the three self-styled autonomous cantons of the “Rojava” (‘Afrin, Kobane/ ‘Ayn Al-‘Arab, Al-Jazira/Hassakeh), under PYD administration since November 2013, differs from that of other regions in the north of Syria. All media wishing to broadcast or to be distributed in that area are now subject to authorisation from the “Media Bureau”, which is controlled by the local Ministry of Information and thus the PYD. It was this institution that in mid-2015 replaced the Union of Free Media (Yekîtiya Ragîhandin Azad, or YRA), then based in Al-Qamishli. Reporters Without Borders has gone as far as to class the YRA as a fledgling Ministry of Information25. Mohamed Mallak points to the fact that he is able to print and to distribute Saydet Souria and Dawda in the Al-Jazira/Hassakeh region thanks to his office in Al-Qamishi26. In the case of the SNP, negotiations are pending. One editor-in-chief of the network commented, “initially, the YRA demanded a CV from everyone working in the media overall, not just for editors-in-chief. It was a prerequisite for being given a distribution permit. Obviously, however, this is impossible, for security reasons. This requirement was lifted when they found out that the project was funded by the Danes ...”. What is more, the Turkish authorities do not allow publications printed in Turkey to enter the territory of the Al-Jazira/Hassakeh canton.

Although the majority of newspapers are distributed in Turkey, the Turkish governmental body responsible for managing the Syrian refugee camps, the AFAD27, is still to agree to distribution within the camps. Furthermore, initiatives aimed at distributing these publications amongst Syrians based in Lebanon and Jordan are few and far between.

Section 2 – Difficulties inherent to the Syrian situation

1) The press – a Syrian medium?

Even some Syrian editors-in-chief have emphasised the extent to which reading the newspapers was not part of “Syrian culture” principally owing to the very poor quality of the newspapers distributed prior to the revolution. Jawwad Shorbaji from Enab Baladi jokingly comments that, in Syria, people used to buy newspapers by the kilo ... “they used them to clean car windows and windscreen’. There is scope for debate, therefore, over the impact of the conflict on this “cultural information item”. Have the war and the restrictions it has engendered altered the ways in which Syrians access information?

The study carried out by the German cooperation agency, Media in Cooperation & Transition (MICT), which was published in August 201428, shows that, generally speaking, the main source of information for Syrians is television, followed by the Internet29. The press is apparently used to obtain information by 41.3% of Syrians in

26 https://www.facebook.com/YRA.FreeMedia
27 Disaster and Emergency Management Authority
28 Conduced in January 2014 – prior to the territorial expansion of ISIS from summer 2014 onwards.
“government-controlled areas”, as opposed to 14.8% in “contested regions/regions under the control of the rebels”.

Nevertheless, in the view of the Enab Baladi editor-in-chief, paper is still an important source of information for Syrians living in the north of the country on account of electricity and Internet outages. In numerous regions of Syria, power cuts make accessing information on TV or via the radio difficult. Stable, ongoing Internet access is unavailable over the territory as a whole, also. Furthermore, Jawwad Shorbagi stresses the fact that “paper has a different purpose, a different use”: the paper format allows sharing. There are those who estimate that a newspaper is read by more than ten people: whoever is interested in the central pull-out will keep it; someone else might want to read opinion articles, or to look at the sports pages, or to refer to information on services. Some observers agree that the nature of the format and also the transient character of these publications mean that hate messages can be avoided or, in any event, channelled – the opposite of the immediate effect of live radio or television broadcasts, or even press-agency streams. Because of the insistence on the importance of paper as the medium, Enab Baladi recently won CFI Ebtcar funding in June 201530 for its archiving project covering content from the Syrian new paper media, the aim of which is “to preserve the Syrian memory and political, social and humanitarian history for the post-revolution period”31.

However, although a crucial process, few editorial teams have paused to genuinely reflect on the role of the press and, more generally, of the media within the context of Syria at the current time.

2) Influenced content

a) The influence of the Syrian situation

The lack of security is an ongoing situation for the entire civil population. The regular army’s bombardment of areas in the north and continued arrests of leading figures of civil society in “government-controlled areas” are problems that face those working in the information sphere on a daily basis.

This is now coupled with an increasing lack of security in what used to be called the “free areas”, with the proliferation of armed groups, each attempting to impose its law over the territory it seeks to control. According to one observer, “it’s a bit like the Wild West in that freedom exists but not without danger. You can be arrested or killed at any moment, by anyone. There’s danger all around”. This has a heavy impact on the work of correspondents, who are in the front line. One editor-in-chief voiced his concerns: “The problem is that the red lines are blurred. There is no logic”. The consolidated presence of Jabhat Al-Nusra in certain zones has led a number of those active in the information sphere to leave Syria, forming a third wave of departures after those arising from the repression perpetuated by the authorities and the security services and then by the expansion of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant organisation (or DAESH). Those who remain operate a system of self-censorship.

Thus, many editors-in-chief point out that one of their priorities is not to endanger the security of their correspondents in the field, even if it means holding back in terms of writing and publishing. One journalist explained how he had given up the idea of conducting an inquiry into violations committed by a certain group in a certain place. Instead, he intends to use generic terms, describing everything in generalities, so as not to point the finger at any faction in particular. Meanwhile, a colleague takes the view that certain topics cannot be clearly addressed for the time being. “This is not the right time. We have to wait for the situation to improve. When things are more stable, we’ll be able to publish such things. But at the moment, that would simply create pointless tension”.

Rami Sweid explains that when Al-Gherbal was launched there was no red line. “However, with the kidnapping of Mohamed Salloum (Editor’s note: Managing Director, taken in December 2013) and the extremist reinforcement in the north, we in the editorial team agreed not to publish everything, even on the newspaper’s website, and particularly caricatures. We don’t publish specific articles targeting armed groups in particular, such as Jabhat Al-Nosra”. He went on to point out that Mohamed Salloum – the newspaper’s founder – resigned from the journal’s management in April 2015, for personal reasons.

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31 http://www.skeysmedia.org/fr/News/Other-Countries/Ebtcar-Media-les-8-projets-laurats
In the case of the media disseminated exclusively in PYD-controlled regions, there is an almost total absence of information concerning acts of violence committed by security forces affiliated to the PYD (the YPG and the Asayesh), particularly the ethnic cleansing of Arab populations or the recruitment of minors into the YPD’s ranks. Although there have been reports that it is relatively easy to obtain this distribution permit and to open a media bureau in the Rojava region, press freedom – for those involved in the Syrian information sphere – is described as a cause for concern by many organisations such as Human Rights Watch\(^{32}\) and Reporters Without Borders\(^{33}\).

So great was the pressure that certain editors-in-chief decided to cease publication. These included Fanous, an Arabic/Kurdish publication, for fear of reprisals, and Al-Masar Al-Hur, a Menbenj magazine, after ISIS kidnapped (and released) a member of the editorial team.

Always influenced by armed Salafi jihadist groups, growing moralisation has increased social pressure. Certain subjects are becoming taboo, as is religion in general.

b) The influence of the Turkish situation

Self-imposed censorship is not a feature simply of the Syrian situation. It is also a reality in Turkey, which is where most of these newspapers are based and where they are unlicensed. Editors-in-chief are aware that the Turkish authorities have to date shown little interest in these publications in the Arabic language, but they know that the content is examined closely. All of them have therefore committed to not publishing articles that could harm the survival of their publication in Turkey. This has led to a degree of self-censorship in terms of Turkish policy regarding Syria. The change in Ankara’s political stance since July 2015 vis-à-vis Syria has simply reinforced this trend.

The Kurdish issue, also, is a thorny topic. Jawad Abdul Muna says that he was interrogated by the Turkish services after publishing an issue of Souriatna that carried a Kurdish flag on the front page – “the flag was used simply to illustrate an article on the recruitment of children by the PYD”. It was subsequently possible for the issue to be distributed without problem.

3) The complex question of distribution

Another major difficulty encountered by these publications is their distribution. This is due to the fragmentation of Syrian territory and to inadequate resources available to such media.

a) Geographically uneven distribution

Owing to territorial fragmentation, it is not possible to distribute the new newspapers throughout Syria. Indeed, this is the position of the government-backed press, also, with national and local publications reaching only those areas that are under Damascus’ control.

Whether printed in Turkey or Idlib and Aleppo provinces, these publications are, in the main, distributed only in the north of the country, their distribution in Islamic State-controlled zones being impossible. SMART, furthermore, has not been printed or distributed in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor since the end of summer 2013. As for the “government-controlled areas”, printing is often local and clandestine, as is distribution, as explained by Mohamed Mallak, editor-in-chief of Dawda and Saydet Souria, and confirmed by Naji Jirf of Henta.

Such dissemination of news in paper format excludes vast populations in the east and the south, such as those living in Syria’s coastal regions. Currently, there does not appear to be any project aimed at organising distribution in zones controlled by Islamic State, for obvious security reasons. However, ways in which to print and to distribute in the south, in the future, are being given considerable thought. With this in mind, a printer,


To make the situation even more difficult, the distribution area in the north of Syria is disjointed – there is a series of small pockets rather than a homogenous region. The boundaries of that region are constantly evolving, dependent on the goodwill of warlords and other armed groups on the ground.

b) Controlled distribution

- Armed groups

In the north of the country, printing and distribution rely on the goodwill (or otherwise) of armed groups that each control a scrap of territory. Incidents have proliferated since early 2015: copies of four of the five SNP newspapers were burned on 18 January 2015 in the wake of the publication, by Souriatna, of a banner supporting the Charlie Hebdo editorial team, bearing the words “Je suis Charlie”, on the front page. The distributor was arrested, threatened by the correspondents, and the five newspapers forbidden to distribute for one month. After negotiations, the Dar Al-Qada judicial institution set up by Jabhat Al-Nusra in August 2014 gradually allowed the five publications to return to kiosks, whilst issuing a warning to the editors-in-chief against any publication that might – in the future – be detrimental to higher Islamic interests. These five publications have been back on the streets in Aleppo since June 2015.

Moreover, these newspapers, which are printed in Turkey, have their content inspected upon entry into Syria by the Islamic courts (Haya Shar’iya) at the Bab Al-Hawa and Bab Al-Salama border crossing points. On 15 April 2015, the Bab Al-Hawa Haya Shar’iya prohibited distribution of issue 164 of Enab Baladi and destroyed the copies, claiming that an article published on page 9 was an offence to Islam and to the Mujahedeen. One week later, on 23 April, issue 73 of Tamaddon was banned from distribution following an article on the forced movement of Christians to Deir ez-Zor. In this case, too, all copies were confiscated and then burnt. However, this decision applied “only” to Bab Al-Hawa: the authority responsible for validating publications at Bab Al-Salama, meanwhile, had allowed distribution to go ahead. The newspaper was distributed in ‘Afrin and in the region west of Aleppo. Last August, again at the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing point, Ahrar Al-Sham was forbidden to distribute a number of publications in Syria, such as the 2100 copies of the magazine Tiena Al-Hureyay (issue 53, dated 2 August, banned on 5 August for having “described the revolution and revolutionaries as terrorist”), those of the Sada Al-Sham publication (number 102, published on 11 August and banned in the wake of a critique of Zahir Allouche, the strong man of the armed rebellion in the region of Syria’s capital against the Damascus regime and head of Jaysh Al-Islam), and those of the 35th issue of Koluna Soryyoun, dated 11 August.

Kamal Oskan, editor-in-chief of Suwar – the magazine of the Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria, which promotes, in particular, democracy, human rights and citizenship – deplores the fact that it is not possible for the monthly to be distributed in the north of the country because of Jabhat Al-Nusra. The NGO bureau in Idlib has since closed. Only the ‘Afrin bureau remains open. Mohamed Mallak explains that Saydet Souria is distributed clandestinely in Syria, passed from hand to hand, because of armed groups that “do not look kindly on the content of a magazine promoting male/female equality”. Teams in Western Ghouta were forced to move offices in late 2014 after pressure exerted by men from Zahir Allouche.

Always the pragmatist, Chamsy Sarkis acknowledges that in order to avoid this type of incident “the person responsible for distribution for SMART used to examine the content of publications and, depending on what that content was, decided whether material could be distributed – or not – from their place of distribution”. This series of incidents in the north of the country led ASML to address their future strategy in terms of supporting the Syrian press and, more globally, the Syrian media.

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35 http://daily-syria.com/2015/08/16/الـ-овать-ـنـمـلـلـعـلـاـومـيـرـوـيـرـوـميـرـوـيـرـوـمـيـرـوـيـرـوـمـيـرـوـم~~/
• **The PYD**

As mentioned previously, publications can be printed and distributed in the three PYD-controlled “Rojava” cantons provided they hold a licence from the “Media Bureau”. As the three cantons are not continuous territory, the situation varies from one to another. The destruction resulting from the siege of Kobane and the exodus of the population at the time mean that no paper media are currently distributed in this canton.

In ‘Afrin, the only canton where SNP newspapers are distributed, the PYD banned publication of copies of *Tamaddon*, *Enab Baladi* and *Koluna Soryyun*, following publication of articles on ethnic cleansing of Arabs in PYD-controlled zones in the east of the country. In May, distribution of an issue of *Souriatna* that included an article on the YPG conscription system had already been banned in that same canton.

Discussions concerning the distribution of SNP publications in the Al-Jazira/Hassakeh canton are pending. It would appear that the authorities in the zone have dropped their demand to be given a list of the people working on each newspaper, after having learned that the initiative was supported by foreign funding. According to information received, the only print works for all publications in this canton is overwhelmed by the number of publications from the different political formations. One might question why the authorities provide so few resources for non-partisan publications to be printed. However, the editor-in-chief of the journal *Büyer* points out that he has not had any problems having copies of his bimonthly printed at the Qamishli printworks.

• **The Turks**

Even though the Turkish authorities closed the border with Syria in March 2015, preventing the (legal) entry of Syrians from Syria onto its territory, there has been no obstacle – from the Turkish side – to the entry into Syria, from Turkey, of goods. In this way, newspapers have not suffered from the closure of the border posts, with the notable exception of publications printed in Syria, such as *Al-Gherbal*, which cannot be distributed in Turkey.

Nevertheless, the situation is different in terms of the distribution – from Turkey – of publications destined for the Al-Jazira/Hassakeh region. Since the outbreak of the conflict, the non-official Derbasiyah border crossing point in the south-east of Turkey is usually closed, with the Turks only very rarely permitting humanitarian aid through. Levels of tension in Ankara increased after Rojava proclaimed its autonomy in November 2013 and in the wake of the PYD’s *de facto* reinforcement in the area. It is therefore impossible for publications printed in Turkey to access this territory, including those with PYD distribution licences.

4) **Lack of transparency in funding**

The lack of long-term funding is a major handicap in terms of the development of the new Syrian newspapers. Many publications are therefore no longer printed or distributed, as shown by the recent *Enab Baladi* study.

The lack of transparency of donors’ funding strategies also gives rise to unhelpful competition between the different newspapers, which is detrimental where structuring of the written-press sector is concerned. It is very difficult to foster cohesion and a spirit of solidarity under these conditions.

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Section 3 – Challenges that the new Syrian newspapers must overcome

The researcher Yazan Badran describes these new newspapers as “proto-media”. In particular, this is because of their lack of professionalism, the absence of any reflection as to their role, and their readership. “They are what will in the future form the basis of a fully fledged Syrian media landscape – multi-faceted, professional and structured”.

If they are to continue to exist and if the role of the written press in the future is to be strengthened, Syria’s individual printed publications now face a number of challenges.

1- A much-needed period of introspection

A reflection process needs to take place concerning the role of the new Syrian press in today’s world, in view of the fact that reading the press is not a “cultural habit” and that the newspapers in question are able to reach only a small proportion of Syrian territory. It is absolutely essential that editors-in-chief and their teams should examine their current role, not only vis-à-vis Syria but also vis-à-vis the Syrians themselves. Is it realistic to believe that these newspapers, given the constraints they face and the way in which they are set up, can play a genuinely unifying role aimed at rekindling national cohesion? What might be their real impact on wider sectarianism? To what extent might they be able to act as mentors in terms of preparing a new blueprint for society?

The definition of their role at the current time and for the future is for the media to decide within the context of a process of reflection bringing together the main players in civil society and, in particular, the protagonists in the current crisis. Only through a thorough reflection process will they be able to adapt to the content produced, while at the same time staying in touch with what they perceive to be their future role and the aspirations of a bruised and broken population.

2- Better understanding of and adaptation to their readership

Newspapers need also to determine their target audience(s) and to bear in mind that newspaper-reading is not deeply engrained in Syrian culture. When interviewed in March 2015, journalist Hala Kodmani commented that there was clearly “more production than consumption” of the media in Syria at the time.

a) A disconnect with reality

Practically all the journalists interviewed were of the opinion that their readers were Syrians living in Syria, but it would appear that the publications have to an extent dispensed with any genuine reflection as to who precisely constitutes their readership (current and potential) and what the needs of that readership actually are in terms of information. In point of fact, if they were to address this, they could adapt the content of publications to public expectations on an ongoing basis.

There is some agreement that the information needs of Syrians living in Syria have changed: “initially, there was a wide readership because the new publications were something novel for Syrians, who were accustomed to the official press. But over the course of four years, ideas have changed, as have needs. Information professionals have either not taken account of this change or, if they have done so, they haven’t changed their approach”, observed one journalist interviewed in March 2015. She added: “nowadays, there’s no need for people to read the newspapers for information on their daily lives. They are aware of the problems because they are experiencing them. This sort of information is good for Syrians no longer living in Syria. Within the country, people’s needs are different”.

The majority of journalists left Syria several months or even several years ago. This is not a criticism, simply a fact. Having lost the close link with the country, the connection with their readers’ actual needs and current situations has also disappeared. This is why a number of editors-in-chief are attempting to visit Syria regularly. According to Absi Smesem, editor-in-chief of Sada Al-Sham, “you have to be there on the ground on a regular
basis. It’s very useful, particularly for editors-in-chief, to get a better idea of what precisely is going on”. However, for several months, now, the security situation and the Turkish closing of the border have prevented him from travelling to Syria at all. Naji Jirf is in a similar position and has been unable to visit Syria for over nine months38, and there are many others like him.

Of course, networks of correspondents upload data from the field; undoubtedly, some still – when the security situation allows – travel to Syria to take the pulse of the situation and to report on what is happening more closely. Nevertheless, being geographically out of touch cannot but have an impact on media content. A journalist originally from Deir ez-Zor told us that certain editors-in-chief are so out of touch that they no longer really know what is going on. “They believe they are aware of the situation because they are in contact with their correspondents, but that is not enough”.

One trainer stressed the fact that “there is too much ‘agreement’ about the revolution and the international community, etc. People are no longer interested in this revolutionary phraseology”, adding “ultimately, these newspapers are read only by those who write them, fuelling the formation of a microcosm of like-minded people within the Syrian elite in Turkey”.

Furthermore, one head of support programmes for Syria within an international NGO pointed to the responsibility of the donors, also, mentioning a so-called donor syndrome: “the media concern themselves more with the wishes of current or potential donors than those of their public these days. It’s only natural, and their survival depends on it. But it is we ourselves (Editor’s note: international organisations) who have helped to bring this unhealthy situation into being”.

Despite acknowledging the existence of a divergence between content and public expectations – while at the same time claiming to be powerless to remedy the situation – many editors-in-chief play down this disconnect on the grounds that they are in constant contact with Syrians still living in Syria. Some quote the initiatives they have set up in an attempt to take the pulse of their readership, either via their websites or via social networks. However, to date there has been no genuinely independent, collective study of press readership to enable journalists to identify their strengths and weaknesses and the aspects that require development and reinforcement. The reality of the Syrian context is a considerable obstacle to conducting such a study. In the view of the head of the European Union delegation to Syria, an independent study of press readership involving as many institutions working in the area of Syrian media support as possible would reveal not only Syrians’ media-consumption habits but also their requirements, and would make it possible to measure the gap – or otherwise – between the stated objectives of current projects and the actual situation on the ground, as part of an ongoing effort to provide assistance for Syria’s civilian population and to make European Union-supported projects as relevant to the Syrian people as possible.

Editorial teams therefore urgently need to embark upon this process of reflection if they are to emerge from what some would qualify as their media “bubble”. They simply must not lose sight of their readership. If that readership is nothing more than the Syrian elite in exile, then that is a choice, but it is a choice that they have to make. Otherwise, they have to remember that they are writing for a readership with which, nowadays, they are not properly acquainted. By being confident in their role and knowing their readership, publications will as a result be able to adapt their content. As Yazan Badran stresses, “publications without a readership do not necessarily attract renowned journalists. In fact, without iconic figures writing in their columns, newspapers struggle to attract readers”.

b) Adapting to multiple audiences

These days, newspaper audiences are very often of different types:

- the readership with access to paper copies within Syria. This readership is not uniform. Its abiding (dramatic) feature is that for four and a half years the population has been experiencing a war situation, suffering electricity and internet outages, caught in a stranglehold between bombardment by the regular army and violence committed by armed groups;

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38 Interviewed 27 May 2015
- a readership with access to paper copies outside of Syria, formed of Syrians living principally in Turkey and, more rarely, in other countries in the region where the newspapers are distributed (potential readership that has been experiencing strong expansion since summer 2015);
- a readership on the Internet, either in Syria or elsewhere.

Each readership is different, particularly in terms of information requirements and consumption methods. These needs, however, are constantly evolving and, according to one Syrian journalist, “the elite has left Syria, and in zones in the north there are now only ‘ordinary people’”.

Online, these publications reach a different public in Syria: people who necessarily have Internet access, whether this is in government-controlled or ISIS-controlled areas, or in the northern region but far from distribution points. The Internet audience is geographically uneven. Access is stable in government-controlled areas, where 78% of the population has Internet access (according to the MICT study), although that access is controlled and filtered by the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE), under the authority of the Ministry for Telecommunications and Technologies, which has blocked access to the websites of numerous publications. In the north of the country, owing to the destruction wrought by the combat and the cutting-off of communications in some parts of the territory, access is scarce and fluctuates by area: the Turkish network can be picked up near the border (including in the region governed by the PYD, the main Syrian Kurdish political power) and physical cables have been extended from Turkey to the major cities in the north via Azaz for the Aleppo region and via Sarmada for the Idlib region. In addition, satellite relay points have been installed in local council buildings, a number of cultural centres and battalion headquarters. Access remains problematic, also, in ISIS-controlled regions. Nevertheless, despite the technical constraints on access, the Internet remains one of the principal sources of information for the populations in Syria, via satellite channels.

The durability of the Internet and that of paper, particularly in the case of an, at best, weekly distribution, is obviously different. Certain publications took account of this fact very early on and, in addition to the PDF version of their paper publication, publish newsletters, and audio and video content. By enriching their websites with multimedia content, they are able to attract a wider readership. However, certain newspapers still have a very weak online presence, with unattractive websites, and seem to be content simply to publish the PDF version.

Many publications, however, have taken on board the significance of social networks and the fact that Facebook is to an extent an information access gateway for the majority of those connecting to the Internet. Nevertheless, this strategy needs to be consolidated, particularly in the case of those that hitherto decided to focus solely on the paper publication.

Writing is important: it endures and is shared. However, by focusing only on “print” certain media are in denial of reality: they have to come to the realisation that an online audience is out there, waiting for them. The physical and the virtual can both be of use to them and will meet the needs of different consumers.

It ought to be pointed out that the Syrian media are experiencing an extremely difficult phase: as an emerging entity undergoing structuring and consolidation, they have to deal with this digital revolution to which a sizeable number of the “dinosaurs” of the world’s press themselves have trouble adapting.

3- Consolidating distribution-point strategy to remain close to the readership

One Syrian journalist pointed out that the distribution points chosen by the newspapers are not necessarily the most pertinent: “that’s part of the disconnect problem. ‘Ordinary’ Syrians no longer spontaneously go to cultural centres, local council offices or Internet cafés, which are places frequented by a certain elite”, and she added that “publications, these days, do not go to the people; it’s the people who go to them, despite the fact that newspaper-reading is not what might be termed a habit. Plus, priorities are different, given the war”. According to one international observer, “Islamist” publications benefit from effective distribution systems, relying principally on an important network of charity organisations in the field.

40 http://www.ste.gov.sy/
This opinion is not shared by a number of editors-in-chief, who point to the efforts made to move distribution points ever closer to places frequented by Syrians within Syria, with a regular review of distribution maps.

So, what of the situation in Turkey, which – according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees – takes in the largest number of Syrian refugees, with over 2 million of the country’s citizens now on its territory? Although the AFAD currently prohibits distribution inside the refugee camps it controls, almost 86% of Syrians live outside of these reception structures. Do current distribution points for these newspapers really reach out to the greatest number?

4- **Genuine adaptation to the “weekly” (fortnightly or monthly) format**

It is worth considering the problem caused by the fact that 50% of publications are weeklies (26%) or fortnightlies (24%). This publication frequency is very often not a matter of choice. In point of fact, this format – particularly the weekly format – is highly complex: because they do not appear on a daily basis, the newspapers are unable to publish “news” in their paper version. Furthermore, they are not monthlies either, which is a format that allows more in-depth investigative and analytical work, or the compilation of dossiers addressing an issue from different angles. Syrian-media-support organisations would be wise to devise training courses specifically for this publication format.

5- **Ongoing work to improve professionalism and establish a code of conduct**

Many observers deplore the absence of neutrality and objectivity in these media, which still features despite the efforts of training courses. One network manager commented, in March 2015, that it is very difficult to be neutral: “first and foremost, we have to be revolutionaries. We use the words people want and expect”. One editor-in-chief gave a more qualified opinion: “we support the principle of the revolution, and document violations perpetrated by all parties to the conflict. This places us in an extremely difficult and delicate position”. He stressed the extent to which the principle of neutrality is difficult to uphold within the context of warfare.

“They have a long way to go before they are true professionals”, according to a leader of programmes for Syria from an international organisation. One journalist from an international press agency added that “the quality of information produced by correspondents within Syria is tending to diminish, as the best ones have left the country in order to make their way elsewhere”.

It is important for media-support organisations to take account, in terms of their training plans, of specific difficulties encountered by female correspondents in their day-to-day news work and also in terms of their access to training courses: it is extremely difficult for a woman in Syria to travel alone in the northern part of the country and to attend courses organised in Turkey.

6- **The issue of turnover and the necessary capacity development**

The Syrian media, and especially the written press, is characterised by significant staff turnover. Although this is not a recent phenomenon, it has accelerated considerably since summer 2015.

For the study, the departure of a number of co-workers, be they based in Syria or in Turkey, has significant repercussions: there is an ongoing need for training; the organisational structuring process is undermined; the durability of these emerging media institutions is jeopardised, and so on.

So, even though more capacity building is still required in terms of objectivity and neutrality, the central requirement has changed. Structural consolidation of newspapers is necessary with a view to offsetting the

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41 [http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48e0fa7f.html](http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48e0fa7f.html)
paucity of human resources, with the preparation of precise flowcharts and a clear definition of posts and tasks deriving therefrom. This will free up time for other work, such as seeking funds.

Most of the editorial teams interviewed say that they suffer from significant turnover of staff, particularly amongst those based in Turkey, with large numbers departing for Europe. There is a very high level of competition between the various media, also, with pay scales often much higher in the case of radio. A crucial issue is the loyalty of journalists and correspondents working for them.

7- Adapted economic models

These newspapers simply have no choice other than to seek to replace their current backers with alternative sources of funding if they are to gain their autonomy on the one hand and to begin to envisage the phase when aid to the Syrian media is scaled down or ended, on the other. Many have for some time been reflecting on an economic model that would guarantee them such independence, although radio stations are way ahead of them in terms of this aspect.

There is no single, one-size-fits-all business model. Each publication has to devise its own, choosing one or a number of solutions. One choice might be advertising, as in the case, recently, of Souriatna and Enab Baladi. Some are considering the paying route: requiring payment for issues distributed in Turkey in order to finance those distributed in Syria; then there is Büyer, which sells its copies for 50 Syrian pounds in the canton of Al-Jazira/Hassakeh. Yet others are looking at subscriptions, or extending their distribution network to European countries. More pragmatically, yet others are using the money they earn from other activities to reinvest in their newspaper, as is the case of Naji Jirf. The Hermel management intends to organise arts events at Urfa to fund some of its activities. For some, partnerships with international publications are the way forward, with Sada Al-Sham signing a contract with Al-Arabi Al-Jedid in 2014 for providing all their content on Syrian issues, and the SNP has set up a partnership with the Danish daily Politiken. A proper private or institutional advertising-market study is necessary if these newspapers are to develop. Some are looking into producing an English-language version of their website to attract a wider spread of readers and thus potential financiers. All this, however, has to be considered within the context of reflection as to audience.

In terms of what is expedient, networking (as evidenced by the SNP experience) would appear to allow genuine economies of scale by enhancing everyone’s profile while respecting editorial identity.

42 http://www.alaraby.co.uk/portal
Section 4 – A few areas to work on

1) For the Syrian media outlets

- Conduct a thorough reflection process on their role and readership;
  - Strengthen existing groups through joint projects to promote the pooling of skills and competences in order to benefit from economies of scale;
- Continue to enhance skills acquired in balancing information and professionalism;
- Strengthen online and social network presence;
- Consider distribution strategy;
- Reflect on a suitable business model.

2) For the media support organisations

- Develop genuine, effective cooperation between the various development bodies, promoting complementarity;
- Act as mentor for the Syrian media and, more particularly, the newspapers in their process of reflection on their role today (and in the future) in Syria, in an effort to fulfil current projects and to ensure that there is no imposition of preconceived ideas not suited to the Syrian context;
- Assist newspapers in getting to know who actually is their audience: conducting a study of readership is a positive move, albeit one with limits within the Syrian context. Furthermore, results from this study must be submitted to the media, these being the first affected;
- Assist – if necessary – the media outlets to identify priorities from the results of the study so that the publications can best address their readership requirements;
- Set up training programmes that genuinely meet technical or managerial needs, using specialist professionals from the weekly press;
- Provide guidance *in situ* to best meet the needs of the media concerned;
- Owing to significant correspondent staff turnover, it is recommended that training courses on the basic principles of journalism and journalism ethics be continued for correspondents;
- Develop training programmes to assist newspapers in strengthening their online presence, either through website quality, “weblified” content, enrichment with multimedia content, a social network presence, website referrals, etc.;
- Aim to help the Syrian media become autonomous and independent of financial backers by providing bespoke guidance on the subjects of fundraising and project creation;
- Provide support, also, for local projects in Syria that have no representatives in Turkey.

3) For technical partners and international funding bodies

- Improve the transparency mechanisms of aid and support policies;
- Foster genuine cooperation between international partners as part of continued efforts to support the Syrian civilian population as effectively as possible;
- Be prepared proactively to review policies as a function of the evolution of requirements and the results obtained by projects.