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Briefing Paper

Syrian Independent Exile Media

Syria



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Introduction

This study focuses on the Syrian independent exile media (SEM) organisations and institutions that have developed since the 2011 uprising. These media emerged and developed amid a war of unprecedented scope and complexity; a war that has taken a heavy toll on Syria's civilians and displaced a huge portion of its population. The dynamics of the war and its impact on the ground forced most if not all of the independent media organisations and institutions that emerged after 2011 to leave Syria.

The development of the Syrian independent media organisations and institutions was itself a kind of revolution that challenged and provided an alternative to the highly controlled, vertical structure that characterised the pre-war Syrian media landscape. The result of this development after eight years is a distinctly independent media sector that is plural and diverse in nature. It exists outside the framework of either state or corporate ownership; it is founded and led by individuals with no links to any political or other interest-based group, and who are committed to professional values. For these reasons, in terms of both ownership and content, the sector can be considered independent.

Within a relatively short time-frame of eight years, the sector went through several distinct phases. The first phase (2011) was sudden and chaotic, as media outlets mushroomed, with many opening and closing shortly afterwards. During this period, media emanated directly from the uprising, in particular from actors belonging to peaceful movements. Between 2011 and 2012, independent media began to flourish in a disordered but lively manner. This phase was characterised by the first efforts to shift from media activism to more professional media production. Activists and new journalists still widely believed that the regime would rapidly fall, paving the way to a transition to democracy. The period between 2013 and 2015 saw the establishment of more media organisations and their move towards professionalisation. As the security situation on the ground worsened, they were forced to move their operations abroad either partially or completely. Since 2016, even more media and journalists have been forced to leave the country.

It should not be forgotten that the Syrian alternative and independent media sector developed not only against the backdrop of war but against the backdrop of systemic persecution of independent actors. The regime's brutality

in trying to silence independent voices is just one source of extreme insecurity and threat to the safety of those trying to practise independent journalism in Syria. Syrian journalists are persecuted by both state and non-state actors. According to Reporters Without Borders' 2017 report, 211 journalists and citizen journalists have been killed in Syria's civil war and "Syria has for years been the world's deadliest country for journalists and citizen journalists, who are caught between the Assad regime and its allies, Islamic State and many other radical Jihadi groups, and the Kurdish forces."¹

The case of the Syrian independent media sector proves that professional development and achievement is possible even in the most extreme situations. Efforts to consolidate the media organisations professionally and institutionally continues, even if, with far less support available, many media organisations are closing or have been considering doing so. A number of media organisations are trying to adjust their strategies to survive amid the crisis while maintaining their professional development. In other words, the Syrian alternative and independent media sector is at a crossroads. Ironically, while the sector is much more advanced and mature

The alternative and independent media sector ...embodies invaluable democratic and professional capital. If lost because of a lack of support today, it will be hard to re-build it later.

than at any point in its recent history, it faces an uncertain future, as the minimum donor support required to ensure its survival seems to be unavailable at the moment.

The relevance of the Syrian alternative and independent media sector and its role in the formation of an alternative discourse in the Syrian public sphere cannot be denied. It is quite an unprecedented phenomenon for an independent media sector to evolve and exist as the only alternative to state- and factions-influenced media, and it has the potential (if it survives) to play a significant role in the post-conflict period.

The end of the Syrian civil war is not yet clearly on the horizon. Nevertheless, the kind of media environment that will be created by peace and post-war arrangements matters even more for the future of the independent media organisations and institutions. Guarantees of freedom of expression and to independent media to operate freely in Syria have not been part of any talks so far. Some of the countries involved in the war, as well as some of those attempting to take more prominent role as “brokers of peace”, are known for their own dismal records vis-à-vis freedom of expression and media freedom. The same applies to the entire

MENA region, which is, according to a Freedom House report in 2017, the second-worst region for press freedom (where 16 of the region’s 20 countries are classified as not free).² There is no evidence that this negative trend can be reversed in the short- to medium-term, as the major drivers originate from the re-consolidation of authoritarianism that varies in its intensity from one country to another. Finally, the global trends are negative, too. These are the elements of a broader context to be taken into account when it comes to strategic considerations about Syrian alternative and independent media organisations and institutions.

On the plus side, the Syrian independent media sector faces opportunities deriving from other regional trends. One trend with long-term transformational potential, particularly in its effect on younger populations across the MENA region, is “digital disruption”. The media landscape is undergoing a paradigm shift, one where the region’s developing infrastructure alongside changing consumer behaviour and growing demand for Arabic-language content and specific formats are all relevant for Syrian alternative and independent media, regardless of whether they are digital-only or use multiple platforms. In that regard, they

are well positioned, as their journalists for the most part belong to the same generation as their target audience (and thus share their sensibility). They are also technology-savvy, and have the potential to tap into their audience’s changing preferences and habits.

It is highly relevant what type of media will continue to influence the public sphere now as well as during the post-war period. There are hardly any grounds for thinking that post-war Syria will embark on political transformation (one that is democratically oriented) and media landscape reform. The moment to act is now, rather than in the future post-war period. The alternative and independent media sector now operating in exile has the potential to contribute to peace and reconciliation, accountability and transparency. The sector embodies invaluable democratic and professional capital. If lost because of a lack of support today, it will be hard to re-build it later. The sector’s development and progress could be short-lived if its very survival becomes uncertain.

The role of local media is undisputed, as other comparative conflict and post-conflict frameworks prove. Though operating in exile out of necessity, the Syrian alternative and independent media

organisations and institutions retain all of the prerogatives of local media: they have been set up and are run by Syrians, they are focused on locally relevant topics and target a local audience, they rely on reporters' networks in Syria, and they are de-facto local media with temporary headquarters abroad.

We hope that this study provides the foundation for compelling arguments in favour of immediate and sustained support for the independent media sector in exile for all of the reasons mentioned above.

There are four main types of actors and potential beneficiaries of this study: donors,³ media development organisations,⁴ Syrian media institutions, and Syrian media organisations. We also hope that our effort in contextualising the development of Syrian exile media in the global exile media framework, assistance and support policies in conflict, post-conflict and fragile countries, as well as several case studies (Zimbabwe, Burma/Myanmar, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Russia and Iran) will shed more light on lessons learned and inspire donors in particular to engage in the best and most efficient manner.

At the same time, as discussed above, the Syrian case is unique. Defining these media as "exiled" is also a matter for discussion. First, we are confronted with the shaping of a potentially complete alternative media landscape, not just individual media outlets. Second, in today's global media environment, geographic borders no longer have the meaning they once did. Syrian alternative media, as mentioned above, can reach local audiences and still have still networks of reporters within Syria. Third, these journalists tend to consider exile to be a temporary phase, while using it to strengthen their organisations and limit the difficulties of operating outside the country.

However, we decided to use the term "exile" as a main definition in our report. We think it is important for Syrian journalists, media development organisations and donors alike to acknowledge

that these outlets play a role today that cannot be limited to the vision of a future transition, but rather is relevant today. They already constitute an actor that competes with and confronts other media actors on the scene: governmental and private, regional and international.

Moving away from a transition paradigm, in other words, would enable us to better assess the value of the media considered in this report, as well as their future prospects.

We consider it a privilege to be given the chance to contribute with this study to documenting the history and state of the Syrian alternative and independent media sector today, one that is committed to independence and professionalism. This development would not have been possible without the extraordinary sacrifices of the Syrian actors or the support of a few committed media development organisations and donors. Finally, we hope that the study documents one chapter of history in anticipation of a future that will be made possible by expanding the supporting community of donors and media development organisations.

Notes

¹ "In Syria, 211 journalists killed in conflict that began six years ago", Reporters Without Borders, 16 March 2017, available at <https://rsf.org/en/news/syria-211-journalists-killed-conflict-began-six-years-ago> (accessed 10 October 2019) (hereafter, RSF, "In Syria, 211 journalists killed in conflict that began six years ago").

² The Economist, "The global slump in press freedom", 23 July 2018, available at <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/07/23/the-global-slump-in-press-freedom> (accessed 10 October 2019) (hereafter, The Economist, "The global slump in press freedom").

³ By donors, we refer exclusively to those actors who provide funding: government agencies, ministries, private foundations, etc.

⁴ By media development organisations, we refer exclusively to those actors that specialise in managing and directing funding for media support activities.

Executive Summary

The Syrian independent exile media as a sector is at the core of this study. To understand the unique nature of this sector, the study contextualises the issues pertaining to the Syrian independent exile media in the wider framework of exile media globally, and donors' approaches to media development in the context of conflict, post-conflict and fragile states (including approaches to exile media); it also discusses lessons learned more generally and draws on examples through case studies. The study is divided into two parts: 1. Independent exile media globally — practices, policies and lessons learned; and 2. Syrian exile organisations and institutions.

Part 1

Independent exile media globally — practices, policies and lessons learned

I
Independent media in exile are by no means a phenomenon associated with the past. Even though there has not been any recent census providing the exact number of independent exile media operating today, there is no reason to believe that this number is falling. The decline in press freedom over the past decade,¹ resurgent authoritarianism and wars have all forced many media into exile.

II
As much as the exile *modus operandi* reflects a choice made out of necessity, most exile media consider their conditions of exile to be temporary and maintain the goal of returning to their country of origin. However, their exile *modus operandi* can take longer than expected; there are examples of media that spent almost two decades abroad before relocation to their country of origin. There are also case studies of influential independent exile media that ceased to exist after many years before they were ever given the chance to return.

III
Exile media exist by default outside the traditional nexus of state and market forces. Although operating in exile is the last resort for media, it allows them to avoid constant state pressure in cases where the state creates conditions in which independent journalism is no longer possible within the state's territorial boundaries. Consequently, exile media have demonstrated notable success in circumventing the state's monopoly on information. Operating outside any particular country's media market, this type of media is also not influenced by market dynamics until they relocate to their homeland and merge into the existing media market of the country. The negative effects of the market have not been identified as a factor that drives media into exile. Those factors remain political.

IV

Hypothetically, the default position outside the traditional nexus provides greater freedom to exercise independent journalism and tackle a wide range of issues; offer diverse points of view; and tackle taboos. The countries of origin of exile media are typically those where the ruling regime for its own interest attempts to monopolise public discourse and, by doing so, uses its coercive power to limit or block access to information, thus impeding the right to information. In that context, exile media could be considered a conduit of this right by providing an alternative stream of information.

V

By building networks of correspondents in their country of origin, exile media provide journalists who remain with an opportunity to exercise journalism that maintains professional standards. By exploiting avenues of digital technology, they also create opportunities for local audiences to become active contributors to the content; to comment and participate; and to nurture a culture of participation that can counter efforts by the ruling regime to curtail space for an active and informed citizenry. These characteristics of independent media in exile can be considered liberating and progressive in a wider sense. All of the factors described above naturally apply only in cases of independent media in exile that declare their mission to be in accordance with the ethical values of independent journalism and exclude exile media that are set up by opposing political groups or businesses with vested political interests, or groups that consider media only as an extended arm of activism and are engaged in promoting a narrow interest-based discourse.

VI

A specific challenge for exile media is how to define its target audience. While its ultimate objective is to reach an audience at home which is deprived of diverse and independent sources of information, in reality exile media are faced with two additional types of target audience: exiled and diaspora populations from their country of origin who have different grievances and concerns than those who stayed, as well as a larger international/regional community that often lacks local angles and a deeper understanding of the nuances with respect to developments on the ground. As their *modus operandi* continues and sometimes stretches over a longer period of time, exile media have to apply extra effort to stay in context and remain relevant to audiences in their home countries.

VII

Independent media in exile are usually formed by journalists (as in the case of Zimbabwe, Belarus and Russia), by groups of activists (as in the case of Burmese and Azerbaijani exile media), or sometimes by a mix of both (see the Iranian media case study). The experience of the Burmese and Azerbaijani exile media demonstrates that even when the founders originate from dissident student activists, exile media evolve and position themselves as independent media devoted to the ethics of professional journalism. Some quickly realise that in order to present a trustworthy alternative, independent and high-quality journalism is the way to go. While the tradition of journalism in the countries of origin of exile media may not meet professional standards, most exile media receive training and in turn train their networks of correspondents in order to cultivate a new generation of journalists who have a clearer understanding of what adhering to professional standards entails. To become a brand that attracts local and international audiences requires time as well as adherence to standards.

VIII

Lack of sustained sources of funding, i.e. the economic base of exile media, appears to be one of the most important aspects of their vulnerability and a leading factor in their closure. Exile media is, by default, donor-dependent with very few possibilities to generate alternative sources of funding over a longer period of time if they want to remain independent of politically charged diaspora capital. Even though it is possible to set up a leaner and less costly media operation in the digital age, the reliance on donor funding is still predominant and has no viable alternative. Advertising revenues, when acquired, are always a small fraction of the overall necessary financial means and we have found no examples in which crowd-funding provided sufficient operating funds over any period of time.

IX

Sources of strength, as mentioned above, can at the same time be sources of weakness. For instance, operating outside the traditional nexus of state and market forces means relying on donor funding and provides very little opportunity to generate income that could reduce this reliance, which is sometimes framed as “donor dependency”. Donor funding is usually granted to short-term interventions (revolving around one-year funding cycles) while professional development requires a medium to long-term funding commitment. For most independent media in exile, access to emergency funds at the beginning of their operations is easier to attract, but strategic planning and development beyond pure survival requires stable sources of funding. Multi-donor sustained support over a longer period in time (Burmese exile media being a case in point) has fuelled the development of strong brands among exile media, as well as enabling their impact and professional output.

X:

The development of exile media requires flexible donors that, apart from a handful of governmental donors, are more likely to be private sources. The experience further points to the reliance on funding from one donor being a particularly acute source of vulnerability for exile media. Donor co-operation is essential as it facilitates the special needs of the exile media sector more successfully. Donors often have different possibilities for funding and while some have both the mechanisms in place and the understanding of the importance of covering operating costs, others lean more towards training, and legal and technical support. It is usually through a combination of all of the different inputs in a complementary manner (through co-operation) that the various needs of exile media can be met.

XI

The policies of providing support to media development in conflict, post-conflict and fragile states are still being debated by donors, and various approaches apply, leading to difficulties identifying consistency. In general, studies point to a sort of “donor aversion” to supporting independent media directly, and the decisions to support exile media are considered highly politically sensitive. There are donor countries as well as private donors that engage in media development in conflict, post-conflict and fragile states by acknowledging the importance of sustaining the local independent sector where it exists. They further acknowledge the importance of that sector during wartime as well as during the post-conflict period. Where the conditions do not exist for media outlets and organisations to operate within the country, exile media may become part of the media development intervention. The aforementioned contexts usually require a swift and multifaceted reaction by donors. When media development exists as part of a donor engagement, it is often built around short time-frames and specific interventions, while the conditions often require a longer-term and multi-faceted approach. Therefore, rather than detecting inconsistencies in

approaches, one can conclude that a bigger problem is the disagreement about what are the essential elements of donor engagement in the complex and politically sensitive frameworks and, specifically, what flexible mechanisms need to be in place to enable such engagement with a view to long-term development.

XII

The community of practice (media development organisations) often highlights that the conflict as well as the post-conflict framework can hardly be generalised. Understanding the context is crucial, as the drivers of conflict differ from one conflict to another. The post-conflict context can encompass many features of varying intensity, like prolonged violence and fragility. It can also be marked by heightened authoritarian tendencies or by the ambition to create conditions for lasting peace by strengthening democracy. The emphasis on context-sensitive approaches can help avoid generalisation and donor interventions based on templates.

XIII

Efforts to formulate the basis for a policy of support to exile media, as well as to facilitate peer learning and sharing among those media, marked the period between 2010 and 2015. The ideas of creating an exile media network and a donor working group on exile media have not come to fruition. However, this period remains a strong testament to the recognition of the exile media’s importance, and to the collaborative effort to identify policy approaches by taking stock of those media’s specific needs.

XIV

One of the most pertinent issues concerns how long exile media should receive support. When the temporary *modus operandi* (exile) becomes longer than the media could foresee, and temporariness begins to look more like permanence, donors — even the most committed among them — may start to withdraw. As a result, highly donor-dependent exile media may close down. In results-driven

evaluations, closure may be considered a failure. However, not all donors or the community of practice would reach such a conclusion. They would underline the impact of the media and the role they played during the course of their existence as leaders and standard-setters of new, more professional journalistic practices, and because they preserved human, professional capital.

XV

Notwithstanding the possibility that some within the exile media community can become stuck in a perpetuated model of donor dependency, exile conditions are never easy and the majority are keen to return. At a minimum there should be guarantees in place that exile media can return without retribution (as was the case in Burma/Myanmar, but not in Zimbabwe) and that there are, at the very least, minimum conditions in place to guarantee freedom of expression. These considerations are so context-specific that generalisation is impossible.

XVI

The post-authoritarian or post-war period can be very complex, with a high level of overall insecurity. Sometimes, amid declared openness and a commitment to transformation — whereby actors from the former regime remain present, sometimes in power-sharing roles or with control of significant economic resources (often directed towards the media) — the window can close rapidly, with the transformation proceeding messily and unevenly. Donors can swiftly shift their focus towards in-country engagement, sometimes prematurely making decisions to prioritise other fields than the media, with long-term consequences for an independent media sector that is either not mature enough yet or is forced to operate alongside state and state-proxy media, on an uneven playing field. However, their exile *modus operandi* cannot be considered permanent, so the independent media in exile should take note of donors’ potentially shifting interests well ahead of time.

Part 2

Syrian independent exile organisations and institutions

I Syrian alternative media organisations undergo a remarkable development after 2011

The Syrian alternative media sector has come a very long way since 2011. Its history has been marked by several distinct phases. The first (2011) was sudden and chaotic, as media outlets mushroomed, with many opening and closing shortly afterwards. Between 2011 and 2012, media began to flourish in a disordered but lively manner. This phase is characterised by the first efforts to shift from media activism to a more professional media production. In this period, the media emanated directly from the Syrian uprising, in particular from actors belonging to peaceful movements. Activists and new journalists still widely believed that the regime

would rapidly fall and pave the way to a transition to democracy. The period between 2013 and 2015 saw the establishment of more media organisations and their move towards professionalisation. As the security situation on the ground worsened, they were forced to move their operations abroad either partially or completely. Since 2016, even more media and journalists have been forced to leave the country. While efforts to consolidate media organisations professionally and institutionally have continued, donor support is significantly less available and, as a result, many media organisations have closed or have been considering doing so. A number of media organisations are trying to adjust their strategies to survive amid the crisis while maintaining their professional development.

II Syrian alternative media organisations constitute a plural independent media sector with diverse media outlets and institutions

The Syrian alternative media organisations present a diverse spectrum of media — newspapers, radio stations, online and TV. Some define themselves as niche media (as per their target audience) while some attempt to reach a nationwide audience. The media institutions range from freedom of expression organisations, to professional associations, to organisations targeting specific issues and audiences.

What is considered here to be a distinct sector are the media outlets and institutions set up outside the framework of state or business ownership, i.e. they were founded by individuals without links to any political or other interest-based group. Furthermore, these are media outlets and institutions that base their mission on professional values and want to produce quality journalism. Most of the media organisations in question have embraced the importance of institutional/organisational development, but they vary in their degree of organisational development. In terms of both ownership and content, they represent an independent sector.

III The prevailing modus operandi of this sector is exile

This modus operandi is not a deliberate choice but the result of a range of non-permissive factors inside the country. The high risk and low level of safety can be found in all given contexts — from government-controlled to rebel-held to Kurdish-controlled areas. All alternative media organisations in exile have as their ultimate goal to be able to fully operate in the country. All have a level of presence in the country through a network of reporters and watch closely in-country developments to assess the possibility of increasing their presence on the ground with at least a small office. The prevailing assessment is that conditions have not presented an opportunity yet.

IV The exile modus operandi has benefitted the professional and organisational development of the media organisations in question, even though it poses a number of specific challenges

The major benefit is the opportunity to develop professionally and organisationally from a safer location, outside the reach of all forces that on the ground present a threat to safety as well as to professional journalism. This means that the exile modus operandi has also created an opportunity for journalistic content that would not otherwise have been made available to the public. In pursuing their role, the alternative media are not only a sector in and of themselves, but also a critical factor in the formation of an alternative discourse in the public sphere.

V The independent media sector is at a crossroads

The number of alternative media organisations and institutions has been decreasing, which in itself is a natural process because the sector could not continue to develop horizontally. Funding has not always been a key reason, but it is certainly one of the most important factors driving the closure of some media outlets. There is a link between the level of institutional/organisational development and the ability of organisations to survive. Those that streamlined their operations and strengthened their management and outreach capacity have demonstrated higher levels of resilience; however, if the trend continues, their existence will be at stake. Alternative strategies of revenue generation, while being explored and applied by some organisations, constitute only a fraction of their organisational needs, and the possibility of achieving financial viability is not feasible in the given circumstances.

VI Shifts in some donors' approaches pose a risk for the survival of the exile media organisations and institutions

Some donors' sudden shifts in approach, specifically lapses in funding, create a situation of vulnerability and uncertainty for the exile media sector. A particularly devastating shift would be if donors chose to prematurely abandon the alternative media sector in exile and focus their support exclusively on local media emerging in areas liberated from ISIS and in regime-controlled areas. Such a shift would undermine the transformative potential of this media sector — a sort of “democratic capital” — and would squander the significant efforts made so far by the Syrians and international media development organisations and the donors that backed those efforts.

VII The sector has not yet found ways to capitalise on its importance

There are many examples of cross-media co-operation, as there is recognition of commonly shared values. Yet each outlet is focused on or dragged into finding a solution for itself, with no move towards formulating a response to the needs of the sector, let alone acting as a sector (understandably so, given their individual struggle for survival). The Syrian alternative media organisations and institutions have not yet found ways to act and express themselves as a sector more coherently and jointly advocate their needs. The individual solutions, while important, do not provide a necessary level of certainty for any individual organisation unless there is wider recognition of the sector's importance by donors. While the Syrian organisations should continue working on organisational streamlining internally, they should more proactively seek ways to establish a strong voice as a sector in order to jointly convey the sector's needs to donors.

VIII

Prospects for the full transition of independent exile media and institutions to in-country operation remains uncertain in the short term

For the majority of media outlets in exile, minimum conditions have to be in place encompassing a guarantee to operate on the ground with a certain level of safety and a level of respect for freedom of expression. While those conditions constitute a reasonable minimum, overall developments on the ground are volatile to the extent that any projected timeline would be unrealistic.

Syrian alternative media organisations should not be rushed into making a decision to fully relocate to Syria before the minimum conditions are in place. It is realistic that the timeframe is medium term, rather than short term, due to the nature of developments on the ground. This timeframe would allow the organisations in question to carefully assess their opportunities and prepare for their return. Efforts could also be made to reinforce the outreach of exile media inside the country, and to explore collaborations with local journalists and organisations.

IX

Syrian alternative media fit well into regional trends that present opportunities in the longer term

One trend with long-term transformational potential, particularly as it affects younger populations, is “digital disruption”. The Middle East has one of the fastest rates of adopting digital technology in the world. Given the region’s large share of the youth segment, its population is forecast to continue to favour digital platforms. The region’s media landscape is undergoing a paradigm shift driven by the region’s developing infrastructure and consumer behaviour. Also, there is increasing demand for Arabic-language content and specific formats. These trends are relevant for the Syrian alternative media, regardless of whether they are digital-only or use multiple platforms. In that regard, they are well positioned with respect to regional trends, as their journalists for the most part belong to the same generation as their target audience (and thus share their sensibility). They are also technology-savvy, and have the potential to tap into their audience’s changing preferences and habits.

To benefit from that potential advantage, the media groups in question need to be well connected with their natural professional community both regionally and globally, in order to share with or benefit from technological (and other) innovations and good examples of efforts to find viable business models.

X

Donors’ approaches should be informed by the achievements and potential of the independent media sector

In the case of Syria, very few donors remain continually engaged. While their support facilitated the emergence of the alternative media sector, their policies were not informed by a long-term view; have been highly uncoordinated; and have proved to be susceptible to sudden shifts in priority. The prevailing method of involvement by some donors is project-based, where the media exist not as an objective in itself but as a means to realise other objectives. This type of engagement does not cater for the development needs of the Syrian alternative media, but rather diverts their attention from their own development priorities to those built into donor-prioritised projects.

The donors should acknowledge the relevance of the Syrian independent and alternative media sector and their role in the formation of an alternative discourse in the Syrian public sphere. They should acknowledge the almost unique development of a type of media and institution that, in a relatively short time-frame, has seen significant progress from activism to professionalism; provided the only alternative to state- and factions-influenced media; and still carries the potential (if they survive) of playing the role of professional media in the post-conflict period. This calls for donors to prioritise the survival and further professional and institutional development of the media in question, which mostly operate in exile, as these are the media with the potential to contribute to peace and reconciliation, accountability and transparency. The donors should formulate approaches to media development that are informed and anchored in a longer-term vision but also act quickly to pre-empt the regression and potential loss of the existing media sector.

Notes

¹ Reporters Without Borders, "Data of press freedom ranking 2019", available at https://rsf.org/en/ranking_table (accessed 10 October 2019).

Part I

Independent exile media globally — practices, policies and lessons learned

The exile media globally since the 1990s

Syrian independent media in exile are at the core of this study, yet they represent only a fraction of the independent exile media community globally. In an effort to contextualise the issues pertaining to Syrian independent media in exile, this study examines the dynamics of exile media development globally since the 1990s and the main lessons learned. Though the history of exile media extends much further than the last 30 years, the media development that covers assistance to media, including to exile media, has started to profile itself within the more distinct field of development aid since 1990. The media development practice and experience and the body of knowledge gathered over this period of time is thus relevant to this study.

The community of independent exile media that emerged in the 1990s differentiates itself from classic diaspora media (i.e. media set up by diaspora groups with the diaspora as its target audience, in preservation of cultural and societal bonds), as well as from international media with programming in local languages (e.g. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, BBC programmes in foreign languages, Voice of America, etc.). The major difference is that the exile media that we refer to have been set up and run by nationals of the countries in question, with the primary aim to provide content which, due to restrictions in their countries of origin, is unavailable to the public. While using the advantages of a safe location abroad for their editorial offices, their

news-gathering and reporting has relied on networks of reporters and the engagement of audiences at home. Most of them place public-interest content high on their editorial agenda and make a remarkable effort to serve the traditional function of the media as an astute watchdog of developments at home, thus challenging the state's "red lines" and contributing to greater accountability and transparency of power-holders at home.

What distinguishes exile media from what is usually considered local media is their location — the fact that their editorial headquarters are abroad. Yet they serve the role of the country's media by effectively creating an alternative discourse in the public domain (i.e. alternative public spheres) of their countries of origin, which is otherwise dominated by controlled and restricted media. The argument that independent media in exile are a specific part of the country's information space has not always been acknowledged. However, those media can be viewed as a *de facto* and active part of the media sector of the country, and a contributor to its information space, especially when more than one exile media from a country exist, thus helping to form a diverse spectrum of media in terms of type, content and target audience.

The community of independent media in exile globally is rather dynamic. Typically, as long as there are minimum conditions for independent media to fully operate in their respective countries, they will attempt to do so. When persecution and legal and extra-legal threats and restrictions amount to conditions in which independent, public-interest journalism is no longer possible in a given country or, anticipating such changes in the near future, the media typically go into exile. The decision to relocate operations outside their country's borders is therefore usually taken when all other avenues are exhausted, i.e. the conditions impose exile *modus operandi* as the only solution. Those conditions are more frequently present in relation to overt authoritarianism, totalitarian states and countries affected by war. There is a correlation between

a country's low score in terms of freedom of expression and the emergence of exile media.

In the reality, the picture is mixed and countries often present context-specific conditions. Not every authoritarian regime completely closes the space for independent media. Some allow a minimum of space if there is a greater interest at stake while forcing those media to operate in legally and economically uneven conditions, whereby their competitive power is curtailed by the privileged position of state-owned and regime crony-owned media. Some allow a degree of open space for a particular type of media, but maintain a monopoly in, say, the broadcast media sector. Finally, not every wartime situation automatically creates a non-permissive environment for independent media. The war in Syria is, however, an example of belligerent conditions that over time and through different phases have made it almost impossible for independent media to remain in the country.

While exile is more often the only remaining *modus operandi* available for independent media in overtly authoritarian and totalitarian states and war-torn countries, it is possible to identify situations where, despite otherwise non-permissive environments for independent media, some still operate in the country while others opt for or are forced into exile. Along similar lines, one can find situations where, for instance, one type of media still exists in the country, though in a very constrained manner, while the country's total monopoly in, for instance, the broadcast media sector forces those who fought unsuccessfully for a broadcast licence to move beyond the country's borders and operate as a radio or TV station in exile.

Global independent exile media have much in common and face very similar challenges. Geographic dispersion, a heavy focus on survival, safety and other considerations, as well as a lack of knowledge of other exile media, limit the contact between them. The use of the term "community of exile media globally" is more a reflection of the acknowl-

edged commonalities among them than an intended effort among actors to act together as a community. In the same vein, the media development field rarely recognises the assistance to exile media as a standalone field.

The adjunct research related to media development and, within that framework the media development of exile media, has been quite modest. Efforts to invest more in media development-related research has increased over the last decade. In the specific case of exile media, the research, where it exists, mainly focuses on one country or even more frequently on one exile media as a case study.

Almost a unique attempt to look at independent media in exile as a wider, global community with distinct problems and specific needs is the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) study from 2011.¹ At that time, as is the case today, there was no exhaustive census of the media in exile; however, the study made an estimate of around 50 exiled news media outlets with an average of ten journalists each.² The sample used for the CIMA study encompassed 33 exile news organisations from 18 countries. Although the sample was not homogeneous, in the sense that the independent media in exile varied in size and subsequently in operating budget, it was possible to identify issues commonly shared by them all.

Among the most frequently shared commonalities are: 1) cause of exile: the type of regimes surrounding the media, i.e. the countries of origin of the exile media were, as the study found, the world's most repressive regimes, with the worst records for press freedom; 2) paths of emergence: the two most common paths for the emergence of independent media in exile were either journalist groups active in their homelands which transferred their efforts abroad or groups of activists opposing a particular regime, who later chose journalism as an effective way to offer alternative narratives; 3) openness to using new technologies: independent media in exile were early adopters of technolog-

ical advances. Using all available content-dissemination platforms (particularly digital ones), their primary goal was to reach audiences at home, exiled communities dispersed abroad and international audiences; and 4) active networks at home: the great majority of surveyed media had reporters or stringers working inside their countries of origin, amid high security and safety risks.

Among the many challenges, the three biggest that independent media in exile encounter were: a) inconsistent and insufficient funding; b) technological interference such as jammed radio signals or blocked websites; and c) problems measuring their audience. Audience surveys were rare due to conditions in the exile media's countries of origin, as well as restrictions in their operating budgets. Many developed ways to gauge the size of their audience, however. In the absence of systemic analytical tools and indicators to measure impact, various media outlets used a range of direct and indirect evidence of their impact.

As much as the exile *modus operandi* reflects a choice made out of necessity, most exile media consider the conditions of exile to be temporary and maintain the goal of returning to their country of origin. However, the *modus operandi* can take longer than expected; there are examples of media that spent almost two decades abroad before returning to their country of origin.³ There are also cases of influential independent exile media that ceased to exist after many years of operation before they were ever given the chance to return.

Among the points of vulnerability, the lack of sustained sources of funding, i.e. the economic base of exile media, was a leading factor in their closure. This type of media is by default donor-dependent with very few possibilities to generate alternative sources of funding over a longer period of time if they want to remain independent of politically charged diaspora capital. Advertising revenues, when acquired, always represented a small fraction of the overall necessary financial means and no examples were found where crowdfund-

ing provided sufficient operating funds over time. In results-driven evaluations, closure may be considered a failure. However, not all donors or the community of practice would reach this conclusion. They would instead underscore the impact of those media and the role they played over time, not least from the perspective that they were leaders and standard-setters in a field that educated a generation of journalists and preserved human, professional capital.⁴

Co-operation of donors (governmental and non-governmental) as well as media development organisations existed in several cases, typically around larger media or countries where more media operated in exile. Where this co-operation existed, it proved to be beneficial for all stakeholders involved.

Since the CIMA study, a number of newly exiled media have emerged, confirming that the independent media in exile is by no means a phenomenon associated with the past. Even though there has not been any recent census providing the exact number of independent exile media operating today, there is no reason to believe that this number is falling. The decline in press freedom over the past decade, resurgent authoritarianism and wars have forced many media into exile. The use of digital technologies has long been a resort for independent journalism and a way to bypass restrictive legislation that is not permissive for new media entrants and is restrictive to those that already exist. That space has been increasingly met with growing restrictions usually found in compulsory licensing and containing difficult preconditions to meet; cyber-crime legislation; extension of criminal laws provisions to digital content, etc.

Efforts to facilitate networking and co-operation in support of media in exile

In the late 2000s, several initiatives emerged among media development actors aimed at facilitating exile media networking and closer donor co-op-

eration, with the possible formation of a donor working group for exile media, and to ensure a sustained training programme to address the specific needs of exile media. Those initiatives arose independently of one another but soon merged into a co-operative effort between Open Society Foundations, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the FOJO Media Institute, International Media Support (IMS) and the World Press Freedom Committee (WPFC).

In 2008, the WPFC came up with the idea of organising a conference with three expected outcomes: the creation of a network of independent exile media; exchanges of information on techniques among exile media; and the creation of a statement of professional standards for exile media.

The Open Society Foundations Media Program, as a supporter of a wide range of exile media under its then-existing Closed Societies portfolio, started to consider the creation of a forum to facilitate networking and information-exchange among the exile media it supported. The first forum took place in Budapest, in 2009, and was entirely experimental, i.e. aimed at testing the water and gauging the interest of exile media in sharing knowledge and experience in an informal networking set-up. Subsequent forums took place in Chiang Mai, in 2010 (hosted by the three Burmese exile media), and in Johannesburg, in 2012 (hosted by the Zimbabwean exile media); they were followed by two additional forums in London, in 2012 and 2013. The forums also provided training sessions and were attended by partner media development organisations and donors, too. The London meetings paved the way for co-operation between *The Guardian* and the exile media, including a section in the newspaper that published stories they produced.⁵

The WPFC's initial idea evolved into a conference organised by FOJO and IMS, with SIDA's support. Held in Stockholm in 2010, it gathered a much broader group of exile media, media development organisations and donors. One tangible result of this conference was a

three-year training programme implemented by FOJO and supported by SIDA. The Baseline Study⁶ that preceded the training programme came up with the following key findings: a lack of knowledge about what training opportunities are available to help exile media strengthen their institutional journalism capacity; a lack of time and money and an absence of internal training and mentoring among exile media have led to low levels of engagement in training; a gap between the main challenges facing exile media — managing staff and virtual newsrooms, financial sustainability and internal training resources — and stated training needs; a need for better communication between donors, media development actors and exile media outlets about training needs; and a strongly expressed need for a co-ordinated network for exile media.

The results of this assessment were the starting point for a FOJO training programme encompassing in-house workshops in Basic Journalism and Ethics, Multi-Platform Journalism and Convergence, and Newsroom Management and Mentoring, as well as regional workshops in Financial Sustainability and Business Models and Training of Trainers for the Newsroom.⁷ The programme was evaluated as successful but, despite interest, it did not continue due to a lack of funding.⁸

The initiatives described above marked the period between 2010 and 2015, and are historically quite unique. Given the lack of long-term commitment to supporting media in exile, the relatively small number of donors willing to engage, and the dynamic nature of the exile media community globally (whereby many among the most active promoters of networking either relocated to their countries of origin or ceased to exist), the notion of creating an exile media network and donor working group on exile media have not come to fruition. However, this period remains a testament to the recognition of the exile media's importance and of the co-operative effort to identify policy approaches by taking stock of the exile media's specific needs.

The exile media development still appears to be a topic at international gatherings, such as the annual DW Global Media Forum. The most recent effort to convene exile media and enable networking took place in February 2019, in Amsterdam. The meeting was hosted by Radio Zamaneh,⁹ a Dutch-based Iranian media outlet that operates an exiled Persian web platform for Iranians and employs Iranian staff. The meeting was dedicated to challenges and constraints, as well as to opportunities of providing independent information from exile. It was supported by consultants from Newsgain, a company that trained exile media outlets as part of FOJO's 2013—2015 programme.

Which donors' policies frame assistance to exile media?

In terms of media development policies, it is difficult to map consistencies or inconsistencies, as media development has not been settled as a standalone field of development aid and, in many cases, is still spread across more than one ministry of the donor country in question. Since the early 2000s, media development “found something of a home for itself in the ‘good governance agenda’” that had become a prominent part of international development since the mid-1990s. As Thomas Carothers and Diane de Gramont note, governance aid has expanded in size and scope over time, and progressed from an exclusive focus on government institutions to “demand-side assistance...that generally began with grants and other assistance to citizen advocacy groups, media, and other social actors that support reform in specific governance sectors.”¹⁰ Donor strategies towards governance aid differ and, while some are extremely reluctant to associate governance aid with democracy support, in an effort to avoid the appearance of interference and a subsequent backlash against democracy aid, others are building their approach around the relationship between strengthening governance and fostering democracy.¹¹

Since 2015, research led by CIMA has made significant progress in systematising data on donor support to media development, as well as in tracking trends in this marginally researched area of development aid.¹² The latest body of research, “Defending Independent Media: A Comprehensive Analysis of Aid Flows”,¹³ has been the most comprehensive so far, even though its sample did not include private donors.¹⁴ The research shows that donor support for global media development has remained relatively constant, if not slightly increased. Nevertheless, an average figure of 0.3 percent of total official development assistance (ODA) allocated to media development still represents a very modest contribution, and also shows that support for independent media being a politically sensitive issue contributes to “substantial risk aversion” by some donors. Compared to bilateral government donors, private donors tend to give a larger portion of their support to the media sector.¹⁵ Two of the report's findings are particularly relevant to exile media: support for independent media being a politically sensitive issue that contributes to “substantial risk aversion” by some donors; and direct assistance to media outlets not being among their top thematic priorities.¹⁶

How to better integrate media development into the governance agenda remains the subject of an ongoing debate. Awareness that strong and independent media is one of the key principles of good governance, along with accountability, transparency and the rule of law, is widespread. Yet donor attitudes towards media support in the context of developing countries generally tend to be more positive.¹⁷ On the other hand, more complex environments, such as fragile states and conflict-torn or post-conflict countries, present a particular challenge to the donor community. As one CIMA report concluded: “Because support for independent media tends to be even more politically sensitive than support for elections and/or political parties, it has a slim chance of making it into official consensus documents on strategic aid priorities.”¹⁸

Since 2011, the donor community has increasingly debated how to address issues pertaining to fragile states. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “a fragile region or state has weak capacity to carry out basic governance functions, and lacks the ability to develop mutually constructive relations with society. Fragile states are also more vulnerable to internal or external shocks such as economic crises or natural disasters.”¹⁹ The increased focus on fragile states emphasised the intersection between peace, security and development. The New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, agreed by the OECD in 2011, was considered a landmark global policy agreement that reflected a commitment by development partners to support nationally-owned and -led development plans and greater aid effectiveness in fragile situations.²⁰ The New Deal is a key agreement between fragile and conflict-affected states, development partners and civil society to improve the current development policy and practice in those states.²¹ Media development, however, has not been an integral part of the New Deal.

The debate about the role of the media in fragile states encompasses various, often diverging viewpoints. Some scholars have questioned the positive role of independent media as forces of good in fragile states. James Putzel and Joost van der Zwan, in their critical reflection of neoliberal media assistance in the 1990s,²² argue that this template cannot work in frameworks that lack a minimum level of national cohesion: “There are, however, serious problems when relying on media freedom to build national consensus in fragile states, especially those recently emerging from periods of violent conflict and war. In situations where national cohesion and consensus is lacking, state or public involvement in the media can, as part of the equation, actually be a constructive force for the social, economic and political reconstruction and development of a country.”²³ They further believe that “the development of an open and free media environment, like other liberal projects, requires the pres-

ence of a strong state which includes, among other features, a well-functioning legal and judicial environment that is able to apply checks and balances.”²⁴

Almost a decade later, a different view as to why media support in fragile states matters was presented in a BBC Media Action policy paper.²⁵ Its author, James Deane, argued that “support to the media in fragile states designed to minimise the risk of division and maximise the opportunities for dialogue should feature more prominently in assistance to such states.”²⁶ Support for the establishment of a professional and pluralistic media landscape is therefore essential to provide a space for discussion for a polarised and fractured society and strengthen a shared identity, which is seen by many experts as the basis for any reconciliation. In countries where governmental structures have been weakened or are non-existent, the media’s role in applying checks and balances is particularly crucial.

The policy paper highlights several important media trends in fragile states. One is the increase in people’s access to media and their capacity to communicate. Within two decades, the explosion of access to satellite TV and other forms of independent media has been accelerated by the rapid spread of mobile-phone use in almost all fragile states. The use of new technologies (and social media in particular) by ordinary citizens is another trend that has opened a new stream of communication in addition to the traditional streams occupied by state and private actors. A third trend in most fragile states is the fragmentation of media environments as a result of both technological innovation and the media mushrooming. The fourth trend relates to the changing media consumption habits of young people in fragile states. Alongside these four trends, the policy paper points to the increased capacity of various factions in many fragile states “to co-opt and manipulate the media and communication”.²⁷ The main conclusion of the paper is that media and communication increasingly matter in fragile states.

Media development in conflict and post-conflict countries is even more a subject of debate and often leads to polarised views. The perception that the media can contribute to war and foment hatred that incites violence sometimes seems to dominate the discourse and deter donors from engaging in media development in those contexts, specifically when support to independent media is in question.

Contrary to that view, UNESCO’s 2004 Belgrade Declaration, “Support to Media in Violent Conflict and in Countries in Transition”,²⁸ stresses “the importance of access to a free flow of information from a range of sources about conflict situations to expose any abuses that may occur and to create a climate in which the conflicts may be resolved” and emphasises “the need to involve the local news media as a principal actor in the development of any media strategies in conflict and post conflict zones.” It further says that “when administering conflict or post conflict zones, authorities mandated by the international community should promote and defend media freedom and other human rights — not restrict them” and stresses that “while it may become necessary to deter direct and effective incitements to violence that may be disseminated, authorities should not confuse independent news and propaganda that calls for violence; a pluralistic media requires the existence of a broad diversity of print, broadcast and other media, reflecting the widest range of opinion within the community.” The Belgrade Declaration “strongly [urges] government and non-government donors to include media development as part of their strategy for reconstruction and development in conflict and post-conflict zones, and donors should co-ordinate their responses for greatest effect.”²⁹

There are good practices that can further inform the debate as well as the practice. While the wars in the Balkans, for instance, are often highlighted as providing examples of media that “forged the war and incited conflicts”, most literature does not emphasise enough that such media behaviour was prevalently associated with state-owned media that

the state used as a “weapon of war”. But, following the outbreak of war, journalists who refused to conform to this approach were determined to challenge the state discourse and report on the war and political developments accurately. They set up a number of independent media, without which the population would not have had an alternative source of information. The battle for independence was fought within the professional associations of journalists, which split in two. Civil society organisations defended freedom of expression. All of these actors were often the target of the ruling regime that used legal, economic and other means to weaken them. Donors and media development organisations that were actively present and developed demand-driven programmes of assistance were crucial to sustaining the independent sector. The level of co-operation and co-ordination among stakeholders was high and instrumental for a holistic approach. The independent sector was also backed by donors through diplomatic channels. It is true, though, that their leverage was high, as all of the countries involved in the conflict aspired to EU membership and were therefore, to various degrees, sensitive to possible diplomatic counter-measures. Had the donors refrained from supporting the emerging and struggling independent sector, it would not have survived in the face of restrictive and discriminatory measures, and public discourse would have been completely shaped by the perpetrators.

In conclusion, as media development is not yet a separate and standalone field of development aid, and as a consequence policies differ from one donor country to another, the policies of assistance to independent media, as well as to exile media, are almost impossible to identify either under “good governance”, “fragile countries” or “conflict and post-conflict” frameworks. There is no separate policy framework to guide assistance to exile media as part of media development. The policy debates are still influenced by a variety of approaches as to whether the media matter, how they matter and how they should be supported. There have been bilateral donors (both government-

tal and non-governmental) with a long history of supporting exile media on a case-by-case basis. The decisions to support exile media are considered highly politically sensitive. This may well be the reason that so little information is revealed publicly and systematically. The other reason concerns consideration for the safety and security of the media actors in question. Private donors often have greater flexibility in making a decision to support exile media. Some private donors do not specifically distinguish between home-based (local) and exile media, and are led by other overarching strategic objectives that include safeguarding independent and public-interest journalism and the identification of leaders/standard-setters in this framework, regardless of whether they operate from within the country, from exile or in a hybrid way.³⁰

The community of practice often highlights that both conflict and post-conflict frameworks can hardly be generalised. Understanding the context is crucial, as the drivers of conflict typically differ. The post-conflict context can encompass many features of varying intensity such as prolonged violence and fragility. The post-conflict context can be marked by heightened authoritarian tendencies or the ambition to create conditions for lasting peace through the strengthening of democracy. An emphasis on context-sensitive approaches can help avoid generalisation and donor interventions based on templates.

Some of the commonalities of conflicts are that independent journalism either collapses or becomes a target; that journalists are at particular risk of being not just casualties but more often targets on both sides of the confrontation; technical infrastructure is often destroyed; censorship and hostility towards journalists is exercised not only by the state but by all sides involved in the conflict; at the same time, the population needs information even more than during peacetime; and the situation calls for a swift and multifaceted reaction. These needs are hardly being met in full, either via holistic interventions by donors or by the co-ordinated input of various donors

that would result in holistic intervention. When media development exists as part of donor engagement, it is often built around short time-frames and specific interventions, whereas the conditions often require a longer-term and multi-faceted approach.

There are donor countries, as well as private donors, that engage in media development in conflict, post-conflict and fragile states by acknowledging the importance of sustaining the local independent sector where it exists, as well as the importance of that sector during wartime and in the post-conflict period. Where the conditions do not exist for media outlets and organisations to operate within a country, exile media may become part of the media-development intervention. Despite extensive experience on the part of some donors, there is still no broader consensus in the donor community on the approaches. Therefore, rather than detecting inconsistency in their approaches, one can conclude that the bigger problem is the lack of agreement about the essential elements of donor engagement in complex and politically sensitive frameworks — and specifically what flexible mechanisms need to be in place to enable such engagement with a view to long-term development.

Case studies: Zimbabwe and Burma/Myanmar

Analysis of past cases of independent exile media is aimed at presenting different contexts and models such as hybrid cases of “co-existence” of exile media with independent media operating in-country, as well as “pure” cases whereby exile media are the only source of independent content. Along the same lines, the case studies provide examples of exile media in transition to in-country operations, by looking at the full set of preconditions that need to be in place externally and internally, as well as the role that the media in question play in their countries’ media landscape in their post-exile existence. It is also relevant to highlight examples of exile media that closed after several or more years in operation and to analyse the internal and external reasons for their closure.

All things considered, Zimbabwe and Burma/Myanmar were chosen as case studies with important lessons to draw. In both cases, as with Syrian independent exile media, more than one independent exile media outlet existed, i.e. there was a diverse exile media community of print, radio, TV and online media that targeted a wide or niche audience, and resembled an alternative media sector in its nature. In both cases, the independent exile media existed over a long period of time and faced the challenge of moving back to their country of origin.

CASE STUDY

Zimbabwe

The independent exile media have been a response to the political environment created over several decades of autocratic rule. Historically, exiled (and clandestine) media, in particular radio, were an important part of the liberation movement against colonial power. In the post-colonial period, as Last Moyo writes, their focus has been on “a new form of liberation from emerging forms of oppression perpetrated by the former liberators”. The content of a new generation of exile media was consumed by citizens alongside content from state media, adding to the controlled information space a platform for communities to access and share different views. Operating offshore created a space to articulate issues without political interference from the state.

The Zimbabwean independent media in exile mainly comprised journalists. In 2005, there were at least 90 Zimbabwean journalists who had left Zimbabwe as a direct result of political persecution and the shrinking space for the independent press. Living in exile in South Africa, other African countries, the United Kingdom and the United States, they formed one of the largest groups of exiled journalists in the world, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. The majority of former Zimbabwean broadcasters continued working for private radio stations such as Short Wave Radio Africa in London and Studio 7, which was hosted by Voice of America (VOA) in Washington D.C. and by Voice of the People (VOP), broadcast by Radio Netherlands. Former *Daily News* journalists and others affected by closures have started online publications such as Newzimbabwe.com, Zimnews.com, Zimbabwejournalists.com, ZimOnline.com, ZimDaily.com, and TheZimbabweTimes.com, among others.

SW Radio Africa was a successor to the short-lived Capital Radio. Gerry Jackson, its founder, took the government to court over its monopoly of the airwaves, won her

case in the Supreme Court, and acted very quickly to start broadcasting. But before the station was even up and running, it was closed down. The government declared Capital Radio to be an illegal radio station, shut it down in October 2000, and confiscated equipment from its hidden location. Jackson fled to the UK and set up a radio station, SW Radio Africa (SWRA), in December 2001, with former journalists of the state broadcaster, Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC). Among other objectives, the station sought to provide balanced and in-depth news coverage; to become a platform for discussion and debate; to be a platform for ordinary Zimbabweans to call for peaceful change; and to be a platform for opposition parties denied access to state media. By declaring itself to be independent, professional and accurate media, SWRA aimed to promote democracy and free speech, voter education and human rights; and to expose corruption, mismanagement and human rights violations by the authorities.

SWRA broadcast on shortwave radio and, to ensure wider reach, it streamed programmes on its website, which also contained radio archives, links to other news websites and a section for listeners’ comments. The website had a dedicated video archive, audio archive and YouTube channel, which allowed citizens to capture and upload videos. Besides Twitter, email, Facebook and SMS, the use of mobile phones assumed a central place in the operations of the radio station. By taking advantage of the technology, SWRA created avenues for its audience to provide feedback and participate in SWRA’s programming process without having to identify themselves or pay for a call, by means of “beeping” the station’s Zimbabwean mobile number and being called back. Mobile phones have also increased opportunities for sourcing and disseminating news and story ideas, mainly through subscription-based SMS alerts. SWRA introduced a free SMS news

headline service as a way of circumventing the jamming of its signal. At the time, SMS technology was the dominant facilitator of participatory journalism in the African context. Alongside its network of stringers in Zimbabwe, SWRA used available technologies to interact with its audience and enable its contribution to content as well as debate. Not only did it enable the formation of a public-discourse alternative to that of the state-controlled media, it engaged audiences in a participatory manner, i.e. it helped create a culture of horizontal interaction and thus break the dominant, top-down approach of seeing audiences only as recipients.

SWRA closed down in 2015, after almost 15 years, during which time it became a recognised and trusted brand. Its closure came as a direct consequence of diminished funding. Many journalists at SWRA were stripped of their right to return; the ban was only recently lifted.

A similar fate was shared by another independent radio station in exile, Voice of the People (VOP). Set up with offices in Harare, it broadcast on shortwave radio with support from Radio Netherlands. By August 2002, the government had become uneasy about external Zimbabwean radio stations. The offices of VOP in Harare were raided and bombed, but it remained in the country until 2006, when its leadership and journalists were threatened with arrest. It relocated first to Cape Town, in 2006, and subsequently to Johannesburg, in 2008. It still runs a website but has failed to obtain a radio licence in Zimbabwe. Its founder lives in Harare and continues to campaign through ZACRAS (Zimbabwe Association of Community Radio Stations) for the licensing of community radio. At the time of interview, the government had shut down the internet to prevent mobilisation of what was first meant to be a peaceful demonstration but resulted in the overt use of force against protesters.

The story of *The Zimbabwean* newspaper began in 2005. The paper was founded by Wilf Mbanga, the former editor of the Zimbabwe Inter-Africa News Agency (ZIANA). He was declared by the president to be an enemy of the state in 2000 for being the founder and first chief executive of Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe, publishers of *The Daily News*. The pressure against Mbanga peaked in 2003 and he decided to leave the country for The Netherlands. When he launched *The Zimbabwean*, he had in mind an authoritative and accurate newspaper of record and a reliable source of information for all those individuals, agencies and governments with an interest in Zimbabwe. The paper promised to be accountable to its readers by providing space for all viewpoints. According to observers, the newspaper fulfilled multiple roles both in exile and at home by providing critical perspectives on the “Zimbabwe crisis” to Zimbabweans “at home” in the context of increasing repression of private media. *The Zimbabwean* offered news, information and entertainment, as well as discussion forums on current affairs. At its peak, 60,000 copies were distributed in South Africa and 60,000 in Zimbabwe once a week. Instead of recycling the unsold papers, they were distributed by NGOs in rural areas for free. *The Zimbabwean*’s website encouraged readers and bloggers to participate in the content. The newspaper stopped printing in 2014; its website, which aggregates the most important news from Zimbabwe, is still available.

Consideration of moving back to Zimbabwe became part of the discussions that were triggered by the hint of change (which has not materialised) in 2009, when ZANU-PF and MDC signed an accord to form a Government of National Unity (GNU). One of the articles of the signed memorandum contained ZANU-PF’s demand for the immediate disbandment or demobilisation of foreign-based and foreign government-funded external radio

stations broadcasting into Zimbabwe. The ZANU-PF government promised to ensure the immediate processing of all applications for re-registration and registration (of broadcasters) in terms of both the Broadcasting Services Act as well as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act. The opposition in turn pledged to call on governments that were hosting and/or funding external radio stations broadcasting into Zimbabwe to cease such activity. It pledged to encourage Zimbabweans running or working for external radio stations broadcasting into Zimbabwe to return to Zimbabwe.

The subsequent opening resulted in the licensing of the *News Day* and the *Daily News*. However, as of today, no independent radio station in exile received a licence before closing down. The broadcasting media sector continues to be an area of particular sensitivity for the Zimbabwean government, such that no community radio has obtained a licence either. Active bans on returning to Zimbabwe that had been imposed on a number of journalists associated with exile media were only recently lifted. However, donors changed their approach in 2010 when the focus shifted to media in Zimbabwe, following the closure of a number of independent media in exile.

CASE STUDY

Burma/Myanmar

During five decades of military rule, Burma regularly occupied a place among the world's top ten most difficult environments for press freedom. Except for a short period linked to the 1988 revolution, when in a matter of weeks a number of media emerged, only to be closed down soon afterwards, the military regime has used all means at its disposal to cut people off from access to diverging views. Following the 8888 Uprising, thousands of Burmese political dissidents and activists fled to neighbouring and Western countries. The emergence of news organisations founded and run by Burmese exiled activists is directly tied to the generation of student activists behind the 8888 Uprising.

The media that were set up in neighbouring countries and Europe are widely recognised for their large role in countering the controlled information space, for telling uncensored stories about Burma abroad and back home, thus internally (in Burma) creating an alternative public discourse, and externally revealing stories from Burma through the lens of the Burmese people. The exile media were often perceived as part of a democratic movement in a wider sense. The development of Burmese independent media in exile is the story of media outlets set up by activists with little or no prior experience in journalism and which evolved into independent media organisations and returned to Myanmar to continue their role as independent media in what was initially considered to be the beginning of the transition process.

The Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) is one of the most prominent of these media outlets; it started in 1992 as a shortwave radio station. Originally, the DVB represented a co-operative enterprise by the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), the Norwegian Burma Committee, and the

Norwegian Worldview International Foundation. In 2002, the DVB began to position itself as an independent media organisation and to detach itself from the perception that it was "a voice of NCGUB". The DVB's mission has four main goals: "(1) to provide accurate and unbiased news to the people of Burma, (2) to promote understanding and cooperation amongst the various ethnic and religious groups of Burma, (3) to encourage and sustain independent public opinion and enable social and political debate and (4) to impart the ideals of democracy and human rights to the people of Burma."

With its headquarters in Oslo, the DVB successfully developed a studio in the Thai city of Chiang Mai, and as of 2007 it has broadcast via several transmitters programmes in both Burmese and various minority languages. In the late 1990s, the DVB launched a website with content in both English and Burmese, and in 2005 it established a satellite-based television station. The DVB has not yet obtained a terrestrial licence and is therefore still broadcasting via satellite. In 2017, it was among five companies awarded a digital channel by the government.

The *Irrawaddy* news magazine has also emerged as one of the most prominent exile-run media outlets. Its predecessor, the Burma Information Group (BIG), was established in 1992 in Bangkok, Thailand, in order "to document the human rights violations in Burma, including the unlawful detention of members of the democratic opposition, other dissidents and ethnic groups." Transforming BIG, in 1993 Aung Zaw and a group of fellow 1988 student exile activists based in Chiang Mai launched the monthly English-language publication *The Irrawaddy*, a news publication unaffiliated with Burmese political dissent groups in Burma and in exile: "The Irrawaddy is neither an advocacy group nor an NGO campaigning for particu-

lar causes. We believe that media must be free and independent and we strive to preserve press freedom." While maintaining this position, *The Irrawaddy* formulates an engaging nature of journalism: "Critical and independent media cannot sit idly and report news on crisis with detachment. We believe media is part of the solution and not part of the problem. Thus, we are not slaves to neutrality — our duty is to search for the truth and inform our readers." The magazine became a monthly publication promoting press freedom and independent media, and gained an international reputation for balanced, informative and in-depth reporting. The magazine was banned by the regime in Burma and anyone found with a copy could be arrested and imprisoned. In 1999, *The Irrawaddy* expanded its coverage to include other countries in Southeast Asia undergoing transition to democratic forms of government, with a core focus on Burma. After 2000, *The Irrawaddy's* websites were launched, including English-language (2000) and Burmese-language (2001) news sites. They were banned and blocked for 12 years, however, and could only be accessed by a local audience via proxy servers until 2011, when the ban was lifted. *The Irrawaddy* was distributed legally in Burma/Myanmar for the first time in 2013, and in 2014 the *Irrawaddy Burmese* weekly journal was launched, reaching readers across the country. The English edition of *The Irrawaddy* stopped printing in English in September 2015, and the Burmese edition ended in early 2016, thus leaving only the digital platforms. "We cannot compete with state-owned newspapers. Policies that allow state-owned media to monopolize advertising and the readership need to be amended," the outlet explained.

Mizzima News was founded by three Burmese student activists in New Delhi, India in 1998. When the media outlet first went online in 2002, the primary function of the then Mizzima News Group was "the col-

lection and dissemination of news and information on Burma and Burma-related issues via Internet and fax". In 2002, Mizzima became a founding member of Burma News International (BNI), a media group that initially comprised Mizzima and four other ethnic Burmese exile news outlets located along Myanmar/Burma's western border, in India and Bangladesh. The group subsequently expanded to incorporate various other Burmese news outlets located along the Thai-Myanmar/Burma border, in Thailand (Mizzima, 8 October 2013). In 2003, Mizzima launched a monthly print publication, *Mizzima Monthly Journal*, which was published in both English and Burmese. At the same time, Mizzima developed a stronger network of reporters within Burma. Additional Mizzima activities took the form of daily internet news and email services, podcasting about Myanmar through www.mizzima.tv, and Burma Media Alert.

Until 2012, Mizzima's main offices were in Chiang Mai and New Delhi. In 2012, Mizzima began a commercial transformation, setting up operations in Yangon and officially registering as a Myanmar company (Mizzima Media Co. Ltd.). Today, Mizzima media products include its long-standing Burmese- and English-language websites (www.mizzimaburmese.com and www.mizzima.com) along with a digital daily newspaper in Burmese and a weekly English-language magazine. In 2017, Mizzima was awarded one of five licences to operate an independent, free-to-air, digital TV channel (www.mizzima.tv).

Former exile media have long existed outside the traditional nexus of state and market forces. Moreover, long located outside traditional state influences, predominant exile media institutions have demonstrated notable success in circumventing the Burmese military's monopoly on information. Since 2011, the country's political landscape has undergone significant changes.

A number of media have emerged and the government has declared its commitment to embark on media reform. Several years down the road, initial optimism about the pace of the transition process has declined, with more criticism voiced as to incomplete reforms, increasing corruption and stagnation. Observers of media trends point to a new phenomenon: the high risk of media capture by the state and a group of the regime's business cronies.

Former exile media have returned to the country to integrate into the new media landscape and transform themselves from fully donor-funded into commercially viable media organisations. However, this effort is taking place in a market dominated by state ownership and businesses close to the state, where the conditions are not equal for all media players.

The two case studies are based on a sample of three exile media per country and are examples of a plural independent media sector in exile. In the case of Zimbabwe, where donors, media development organisations and the media sector regularly convened co-ordination meetings (e.g. the Zimbabwe International Partnership), there was an effort to identify the key needs of the sector and to adjust donor assistance to better meet those needs. However, some of the key exile media ceased to exist before they attempted to relocate to Zimbabwe, despite their acknowledged impact, as a result of various factors: the hostility of the regime towards exile media; a ban on returning imposed on leading figures of some exile media; the high cost of exile operations; shifts in donor support, etc. Unlike the Zimbabwean exile media, the Burmese exile media were given the option to return at the beginning of the political transformation in Myanmar and to integrate into the nascent and vibrant Myanmar media scene. The key lessons learnt from the two cases are: 1) the development and subsequent impact requires more time to be built and commitment by donors; 2) return is possible only when minimum guarantees exist; and 3) organisations strengthened over years of work in exile face different challenges on their return that require a new set of skills.

Case studies: Belarus, Azerbaijan, Russia and Iran

Media outlets selected for the case studies below have been chosen in order to demonstrate the variety of formats that exiled news production and distribution can take, as well as the challenges these media face despite the nature of the regimes back home. Two of the selected media outlets are only relatively recently in exile (around five years), but have already passed the setting-up stage, while two others have operated for almost 15 years. Two outlets, Meduza and Euroradio, have the possibility to operate legally in exile, albeit in a limited fashion, while two others face the threat of serious repression. Three outlets, Euroradio, Zamaneh Media and Meydan TV, are heavily donor-dependent, while the fourth, Meduza, gets more than 60 percent of its monthly profits from commercial revenues. Meydan TV and Zamaneh target rather broad demographics, while Euroradio and Meduza have consistently targeted young people as actors of change during the first several years of their existence.

These media outlets share common features that cannot be assigned to them based only on the specifics of their respective political regimes or the cultural habits of their audiences. They all have a strong vision in terms of their mission and audience, as well as a clear editorial line and standards, and they have combined independent journalism with a resistance to pressure at home, where they have often been called foreign “traitors” or “agents”. Those that have existed for more than a decade have had to reformulate their editorial strategies in order to keep up with the development of new technologies and the shifting habits of audiences at home. All of them have people working for them inside their home countries yet have no opportunity to return and continue fully operating inside the country.

CASE STUDY

Russia

Founded in 2014 by the former editor-in-chief of Lenta.ru, Galina Timchenko, Meduza (<http://meduza.io>) operates from Latvia but receives a significant portion of its funding from advertising by Russian companies or businesses with a significant presence in Russia.

The project began as a protest by Timchenko, whose sacking from Lenta.ru after 10 years as editor-in-chief was apparently triggered by the Kremlin’s desire to take control of this influential portal. Following her sacking, 39 editors and journalists voluntarily resigned from Lenta.ru. Some formed the core of Meduza’s first newsroom. Latvia was deemed the easiest country to get started in, as Timchenko had a residency permit there as a property owner. Meduza is registered as a private company, with Timchenko as its sole shareholder. It has received a mix of private investor loans and donor funding (the latter is partially disclosed in official reports submitted by the company and includes grants from SIDA and Oak Foundation).

Significantly, Meduza has grown in popularity among Russians, especially younger ones, for taking a very audience-centric approach to its formats. It was inspired by BuzzFeed and other popular foreign online resources, and was one of the first media in/for Russia to introduce new types of “explainers” and quizzes, becoming one of the first successful native advertisers in Russia.

Currently, half of Meduza’s staff is based in Riga (including editor-in-chief Ivan Kolkov and director Timchenko), with the other half based in Moscow/Russia. The outlet’s foreign status allows it to receive funding from multiple stakeholders and does not prevent it from working with large Russian companies such as the state-owned airliner Aeroflot or Russian mobile operators. It has numerous social

media accounts and has publicly posted its audience figures during its first few years of existence, demonstrating its spirit of transparency.

Since 2016, Meduza has run its own summer school for Russian regional journalists, called “Farm”. An attempt to organise it in Russia in 2019 has been postponed. It has also organised conferences in Russia, which signals that the authorities do not recognise the outlet as a threat.

In September 2018, the government-controlled channel RT suggested calling Meduza a “foreign agent” for having received foreign donor funding that could be spent for “political purposes”. Unlike Radio Are Europe/Radio Liberty and its project Current Time, or Voice of America, Meduza has not been introduced into the list of ‘foreign agent media’ yet. Still, if the authorities decide to crack down on Meduza, advertisers may become wary of associating themselves with the brand, and the outlet may have to increase its dependence on donors.

Meduza has a monthly audience of 28 million unique users, 70 percent of whom are under 35. Its owners do not envisage returning to Russia, but staffers regularly travel to Russia and do not experience any pressure there.

CASE STUDY

Belarus

In Belarus, the regime effectively silences any internal independent broadcasting, allowing limited press freedom only to a handful of print and online media outlets. This has prompted several groups of media professionals to search for broadcasting opportunities abroad. Currently, those external broadcasters are heavily present online and, in a way, compete with the local market of independent media. But they remain the only media able to provide independent news and programming on-air, and TV and radio are still popular channels in terms of Belarusian information-gathering habits.

The most relevant case study is European Radio for Belarus. Set up in Poland in 2005 by a group of media professionals from Belarus who already had experience of both in-country and exiled broadcasting, it has positioned itself as an independent media project that aims to return to Belarus when the democratic transition starts.

European Radio for Belarus, or Euroradio, has prioritised both traditional ways of broadcasting (i.e. FM) and online broadcasting. It chose a specific target audience – 15–35-year-olds – and created music, entertainment and news programming aimed at this demographic. Its editorial and programming strategy was created on the basis of sociological surveys and focus groups.

The station had to operate completely underground in Belarus between 2006 and 2009, before it received accreditation for several correspondents in its bureau, which has been extended annually ever since. However, the authorities have not permitted Euroradio to apply for a broadcasting licence.

Over time, with the growth of online access in Belarus, Euroradio has had to adjust its programming and editorial

strategies to suit new types of audience. Currently, it offers three types of playlist targeting different age groups, while its website and social media are rich with visual content that is not repeated on air. Its studios in Minsk enable live visual broadcasting of selected programmes on all social media, while Warsaw-based DJs work in close co-ordination with their Belarus-based counterparts. The Belarusian secret services have attempted several times to arrest Euroradio's staff and threaten its management, but the station still enjoys rather mild treatment from the authorities.

As per the station's management, part of that success is Euroradio's strict adherence to impartiality and balanced content. The station provides opinions from across the political spectrum and does not engage in highly politicised activity that would damage its integrity. Sociological surveys in Belarus have shown that, over the years, many Belarusians perceive Euroadio to be a local station and are unaware of its registration abroad. This has bothered the authorities, with authoritarian leader Alexander Lukashenka openly naming it a "Polish" station during a widely televised meeting with the press in 2019. However, despite being registered in Poland, Euroradio considers itself to be a Belarusian media outlet and is embedded in the Belarusian media scene. It has received several "free speech" awards from the Belarusian Association of Journalists and collaborates with Belarus-based NGOs, startups and commercial companies. With a monthly audience of more than one million people on its website and social media, it is listed among the top 15 independent media sites in Belarus, while its remaining FM broadcasting from Poland reaches hundreds of thousands of offline listeners.

A full return to Belarus is impossible for the station unless the political situation in

the country changes, allowing for independent broadcasters to receive a licence without agreeing to be censored. Operating in a hybrid exile mode, Euroradio cannot accept payments to its Belarus-based office other than from its mother company, and it remains heavily reliant on donor money, most of which comes from foreign governmental donors. To decrease dependency on donor funding, Euroradio engages in native and traditional advertising, co-organises cultural events and looks for other ways to get additional revenues, e.g. by providing production-related services.

CASE STUDY

Azerbaijan

In Azerbaijan, the regime effectively bans any independent media, including websites, by jailing bloggers, journalists and activists and by applying other forms of pressure. The only outlets that provide independent, balanced content have to operate abroad and there is only a handful of them, including the Azerbaijani services of the BBC and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

In this situation, Meydan TV, an online TV and multimedia platform set up by former blogger Emin Milli in 2013, became an important new voice in trying to reach the Azeri population from exile. Meydan TV operates from Berlin, where it is registered as a not-for-profit “public association”. Until early 2019, the station also had an office in Tbilisi, Georgia, which was shut down as part of a consolidation process within Meydan TV. Running a separate legal entity in a country close to Azerbaijan was useful from the point of view of lowering the cost of salaries and the possibility of transferring cash to underground correspondents inside Azerbaijan, but it was burdensome in terms of donor-funding transparency, management and legal support.

Unlike projects set up by professional journalists, Meydan TV is intertwined with an activist agenda. Emin Milli, an activist and blogger, had to emigrate to Germany in 2011 after spending 16 months in jail, allegedly for “a fight in the restaurant”. His sentencing was internationally regarded as repression for his criticism of the government. While abroad, he has remained an open critic of the government and received numerous threats for his views.

The initial funding to start Meydan TV came partly from donations by the Azeri diaspora. As Meydan TV’s co-founder said in the interview with the *Huffington Post* in 2016, the station management

had to learn the rules of independent and trustworthy journalism on the job, while already in exile. Berlin-based staff would regularly engage in public acts to attract attention to the Azerbaijani regime’s violations of human rights. In turn, the authorities arrested their family members on trumped-up charges or forced them to deny their ties to the “traitors” in exile.

Meydan TV relies on a network of journalists both inside and outside Azerbaijan. For security purposes, the identities of its in-country staff are hidden and remuneration for their work has to be provided in secret. Exile-based authors of Meydan TV are more outspoken. The website and YouTube channel of Meydan TV largely deals with political affairs, social issues and issues related to minorities and vulnerable groups and their rights.

Despite initial success in crowdfunding, the project has failed to collect recurrent payments from the Azeri diaspora and is almost 100 percent dependent on grants from international donors. The German government does not provide funding to Meydan TV, with no official reason given. An article in *Foreign Policy* in 2016 claimed that Germany feared damaging diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan. In 2019, Meydan TV came in for criticism from some exiled Azeri opposition politicians for the positive remarks made by its director about President Ilham Aliyev’s pardoning of dozens of human rights defenders and journalists (but keeping another dozen in jail).

To diversify its activities and impact, Meydan TV’s founders started a social media-only project, ROMB, which creates short Russian-language videos on current affairs and mostly targets Russia-based audiences. This project is managed separately from Meydan TV and is an attempt to reach the Russian-language audience that consumes the rather slender offer that Meydan TV has in Russian on Azerbaijan.

In April 2019, Milli resigned as director, saying he did not approve of anyone staying in their management job for more than five years. This followed the closure of the Tbilisi office and several managers leaving the station. The project continues to operate from Germany and enjoys multi-donor support, but its future will depend on the new leadership’s ability to keep Meydan TV’s popularity and credibility among its target audiences.

The audience numbers of Meydan TV ranges, and is based on the accessibility of its platforms to users in Azerbaijan, where authorities often block access to its webpage as well as file complaints about its content on YouTube and support hacking its Facebook pages. At its peak, the outlet has claimed millions of visitors/viewers monthly.

CASE STUDY

Iran

Radio Zamaneh was founded in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in 2006, after the Dutch parliament passed a resolution supporting independent Iranian media. It started as a collaborative effort between Press Now (currently merged into Free Press Unlimited) and a team of Iranian journalists and bloggers. Radio Zamaneh is registered as a not-for-profit entity under Dutch law and states its independence from any political, ethnic or social group inside or outside Iran. It chose broadcasting on the web as a way to reach a predominantly young Iranian audience both inside and outside the country.

Radio Zamaneh realised quite quickly that its audience among the Iranian diaspora was quite significant and that it had to decide whether they should be regarded as one of its main target audiences. As a result, the station's mission has become to provide "independent journalism, citizen reporting, e-learning, debate and knowledge to an audience in Iran and the Persian speaking community around the world, building bridges between Iran and the Iranian diaspora and between different Persian speaking communities, such as in Afghanistan and Central Asia."

The station's funding has come from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the European Commission, the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a range of other donors. Free Press Unlimited for many years provided committed core funding which, between 2014 and 2017, was dedicated mostly to strengthening Radio Zamaneh's internal capacity and management in order for it to continue to operate in a fully autonomous manner.

The station has stopped broadcasting live and now concentrates solely on its website, and sometimes hosts podcasts. It has also rebranded itself as Zamaneh

Media, and is looking for alternative revenue streams. This includes providing translation services and online advertising mostly outside the Netherlands, allowing it to have a limited but reliable stream of "no strings attached" funding that can be used for operational purposes or as a safe deposit. The outlet also appeals to its readers to support it and "other smaller independent media".

On top of running the website, Zamaneh Media hosts an online learning portal, Academy Zamaneh, and a citizen-reporting portal, Tribune Zamaneh. Courses at the Academy are free and dedicated to potential journalists in Iran, especially young people who want to professionalise. Zamaneh also offers Iranians a special online application allowing "unrestricted and secure internet access".

The website audience of Radiozamaneh.com is 2.6 million unique visitors.

Several important observations stem from the case studies above. Long-term efforts to support independent broadcasting from abroad can be successfully combined with the transformation of supported exile media from more traditional outlets into digital-first outlets (Belarus, Iran). Severe political repression in the home country may limit exile media's ability to efficiently find and retain high-quality reporters on the ground, thus making it more challenging to reach and retain audiences with quality and locally relevant content (Azerbaijan, Iran). In the case of mild authoritarianism and a developed digital economy, it is possible for an exile media outlet to get significant revenues by competing with non-exile outlets for advertising. This should be looked at as a window of opportunity, and to survive the exile media should be prepared for the worsening of conditions for independent journalism and business activities in the country of exile (Russia).

Concluding remarks

Exile media exist by default outside the traditional nexus of state and market forces. Although exile *modus operandi* is the last *modus* for media to resort to — and is therefore not so much a choice as the only alternative at hand when all other avenues have been exhausted — it allows those media to avoid constant state pressure in cases where the state creates conditions in which independent journalism is no longer possible within the state's territorial boundaries. Consequently, exile media have demonstrated notable success in circumventing the state's monopoly on information. Operating outside any particular country's media market, this type of media is also not influenced by the market dynamics until they relocate to their homeland and merge into its existing media market. The negative effects of the market have not been identified as a factor that drives media into exile. Those reasons remain political.

Hypothetically, the default position outside the traditional nexus allows for greater freedom to exercise independent journalism and tackle a wide range of issues, provide diverse points of view, and tackle taboos. Given the fact that the countries of origin are typically those where the ruling regimes for their own sake attempt to monopolise public discourse — and, by doing so, use their coercive power to limit or completely close access to information, thus impeding the right to information — exile media could be considered a conduit of this right by providing an alternative stream of information. By recruiting networks of correspondents in the country, they also give journalists who remain an opportunity to exercise journalism that maintains professional standards. By exploiting avenues of digital technologies, they also create opportunities for their audience to become active contributors to the content, to comment and participate, and in this way nurture a culture of participation which counters efforts by the ruling regime to curtail space for an active and informed citizenry. These characteristics of independent media

in exile can be considered liberating and progressive in a wider sense. All of the above naturally applies only in the case of independent media in exile that declare their mission to be in accordance with the ethical values of independent journalism and excludes exile media that are set up by opposing political groups or businesses with vested political interests, or groups that consider media only to be an extended arm of activism engaged in promoting a narrow interest-based discourse.

Independent media in exile are usually formed by journalists (as in Zimbabwe, Belarus and Russia), groups of activists (as in the case of the Burmese and Azerbaijani exile media), or by groups of both (as in the Iranian case study). The experience of the Burmese and Azerbaijani exile media demonstrates that even when the founders originate from groups of dissident student activists, the exile media's development can lead to their positioning as independent media devoted to the ethics of professional journalism. Some quickly realise that in order to present a trustworthy alternative to hegemonic narratives, independence and good-quality journalism is the way to proceed. While the journalistic tradition in the countries of origin of the exile media may not always present high professional standards, most of the exile media receive training and in turn train their networks of correspondents, thus cultivating a new generation of journalists with a clearer understanding of what adherence to professional standards means. To become a brand that attracts local and international audiences requires time as well as adherence to those standards.

Sources of strength can at the same time be sources of weakness. For instance, operating outside the traditional nexus of state and market forces means relying on donor funding and provides very little opportunity to generate income that could lessen this reliance, which sometimes framed as “donor dependency”. Even though in a digital age it is possible to set up a leaner and less costly media operation, the reliance on donor funding is still predominant and has no

viable alternative. Donor funding is usually tailored to short-term interventions, while professional development requires a medium- to long-term funding commitment. For most independent media in exile, access to emergency funds at the beginning of their operations is easier to attract, but strategic planning and development beyond pure survival requires stable sources of funding. Multi-donor sustained support over a longer period in time (Burmese exile media being a case in point) has enabled the development of strong brands among exile media, as well as their impact and professional output. Media development related to exile media requires flexible donors that, apart from a handful of governmental donors, are more likely to be found among private donors. Experience further points to reliance on one donor funding as a particularly acute source of vulnerability for exile media.³¹ Donor co-operation is essential, as it facilitates the special needs of the exile media sector more successfully.³² Donors often have different options, and while some have both the mechanisms in place and the understanding of the importance of covering operating costs, others lean more towards training, legal and technical support. It is usually via a combination of all inputs in a complementary manner (through co-operation) that the various needs of exile media can be met.

Networks of correspondents within the countries of origin of exile media are both a strength and a vulnerability, too. While the existence of such networks is essential to having relevant content, in-country correspondents are much closer to violence and persecution (e.g. correspondents of the Democratic Voice of Burma, SW Radio Africa, etc.). Some exile media have sophisticated ways to protect the identity of their correspondents and ensure the safe technical transmission of content to their offices abroad. Some regimes have often extended the use of coercive force against audiences consuming the content of “banned” media. In the digital age, regimes have also become more tech-savvy and had more surveillance, blocking and filtering tools at their disposal. This demands a high level of knowledge of and acces-

sibility to the most up-to-date circumventing techniques, as well as digital safety on the part of exile media.

When the temporary *modus operandi* (exile) becomes longer than the media could foresee, and their temporary state starts to look more permanent, donors, even the most committed ones, may start to withdraw. As a result, highly donor-dependent exile media may close down (e.g. SW Radio Africa, VOP). In results-driven evaluations, closure may be considered a failure. However, not all donors or the community of practice would reach that conclusion. They would underline the impact of those media and the role they played over time as leaders and standard-setters in a field that educated a generation of journalists and preserved human, professional capital.³³

When, indeed, is the right time for exile media to return to their country of origin? It is a question without a straightforward answer. Notwithstanding the possibility that some within the exile media community can become stuck in a perpetuated model of donor dependency, the conditions of exile are never easy and the majority are keen to return. At a minimum, there should be guarantees in place that the exile media can return without retribution (as in Burma/Myanmar, but not Zimbabwe) and that there are at least minimum guarantees of freedom of expression. These considerations are so context-specific that generalisation is impossible.

The post-authoritarian or post-war period can be very complex, with a high level of overall insecurity. Sometimes a period

of declared openness and a commitment to transformation sees actors from the former regime remain present, sometimes in power-sharing roles or in control of significant economic resources (often directed to the media); the window can close rapidly and transformation can proceed messily and unevenly. Donors can swiftly shift their focus towards in-country engagement, sometimes prematurely deciding to prioritise other fields rather than assist the media, with long-term consequences for an independent media sector that either isn't mature enough yet or is forced to operate between state and state-proxy media and on an uneven playing field. However, the exile *modus operandi* cannot be considered a permanent state — a reality that independent media in exile should plan for well ahead of time.

Notes

- 1 Bill Ristow, "Independent Media in Exile: A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance", Center for International Media Assistance, June 2011 (hereafter, Ristow, "Independent Media in Exile").
- 2 Ristow, "Independent Media in Exile", p. 13: "Eric Johnson, who works in Shanghai as a consultant and director of Internews International, has worked with exile media in a number of countries, and, for the organizers of the Stockholm conference, he catalogued the countries that have journalists operating from outside their borders. He estimates there are 'maybe 50 serious exile media [outlets], with an average of 10 journalists each, some paid, some not.'"
 - 3 See, below, the case of Myanmar.
 - 4 Interview with Jane McElhone, former OSF Senior Program Manager, 29 January 2019; interview with Marie Struthers, former OSF Senior Program Manager, 29 January 2019.
 - 5 Interview with Marie Struthers, former OSF Media Program, 29 January 2019.
 - 6 "Independent Media in Exile: A Baseline Consultation", Intermedia, FOJO, June 2013.
 - 7 <https://fojo.se/nyheter/281-media-in-exile-problems-and-solutions>
 - 8 Interview, Johan Romare, former international director, FOJO, 18 January 2019.
 - 9 Radio Zamaneh is an Iranian exile media platform based in the Netherlands.
 - 10 Thomas Carothers and Diane de Gramont, "Aiding Governance in Developing Countries: Progress Amid Uncertainties", The Carnegie Papers, November 2011, available at https://carnegieendowment.org/files/aiding_governance.pdf (accessed 10 October 2019) (hereafter, Carothers and de Gramont, "Aiding Governance in Developing Countries").
 - 11 Carothers and de Gramont, "Aiding Governance in Developing Countries": "In this view, the key constituent principles that governance aid seeks to advance — especially accountability, participation, and transparency — are also fundamental democratic principles."
 - 12 Mary Myers and Linet Angaya Juma, "Defending Independent Media: A Comprehensive Analysis of Aid Flows", Center for International Media Assistance, 9 June 2018, available at <https://www.cima.ned.org/publication/comprehensive-analysis-media-aid-flows> (accessed 10 October 2019) (hereafter, Myers and Juma, "Defending Independent Media"); Shanthi Kalathil, "A Slowly Shifting Field: Understanding Donor Priorities in Media Development", Center for International Media Assistance, 25 April 2017, available at <https://www.cima.ned.org/publication/slowly-shifting-field/> (accessed 10 October 2019); Daniel O'Maley, "Tracking Media Development Support: An Update on 2016 Funding Levels", Center for International Media Assistance, 30 March 2018, available at <https://www.cima.ned.org/blog/tracking-media-development-donor-support-update-2016-funding-levels/> (accessed 10 October 2019).
 - 13 Myers and Juma, "Defending Independent Media".
 - 14 Myers and Juma, "Defending Independent Media". It revealed that new emerging bilateral donors, such as China and the UAE, have significant involvement in media development, which may have implications for the field, going on the presumption that their involvement does not come with commitments to democracy nor does it place aid intervention in that context. Unlike OECD donor countries, which often situate support to independent media within a strategy of promoting democracy and governance, China is primarily led by soft power and economic self-interest.
 - 15 Myers and Juma, "Defending Independent Media".
 - 16 Mary Myers, Nicola Harford and Katie Bartholomew, "Media Assistance: Review of the Recent Literature and Other Donors' Approaches", A Capitalisation Exercise (CapEx) for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), September 2017, available at https://www.shareweb.ch/site/DDLGN/Documents/Media_Assistance_Donor_and_Lit_Review%202017.pdf (accessed 10 October 2019).
 - 17 Even in the case of the former (governance agenda in developing countries), media development remains prevalently an instrument to further governance goals, rather than a goal in itself.
 - 18 Eduardo González Cauhapé-Cazaux and Shanthi Kalathil, "Official Development Assistance for Media: Figures and Findings — A Report by CIMA and the OECD", Center for International Media Assistance, March 2015, available at <http://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/docs/CIMA.pdf> (accessed 10 October 2019).
 - 19 "Fragile States 2014: Domestic Revenue Mobilization in Fragile States", OECD, 2014, available at <http://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/docs/FSR-2014.pdf> (accessed 10 October 2019).
 - 20 "The New Deal", International Dialogue of Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, available at <https://www.pbsdialogue.org/en/new-deal/about-new-deal/> (accessed 10 October 2019) (hereafter, "The New Deal").
 - 21 "The New Deal".
 - 22 James Putzel and Joost van der Zwan, "Why Templates for Media Development Do Not Work in Crisis States: Defining and Understanding Media Development Strategies in Post-War and Crisis States", Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, 2005, available at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csrc-background-papers/Why-Templates-for-Media-Development-do-not-work-in-Crisis-States.pdf> (accessed 10 October 2019) (hereafter, Putzel and van der Zwan, "Why Templates for Media Development Do Not Work in Crisis States").
 - 23 Putzel and van der Zwan, "Why Templates for Media Development Do Not Work in Crisis States".
 - 24 Putzel and van der Zwan, "Why Templates for Media Development Do Not Work in Crisis States".
 - 25 James Deane, "Fragile states: the role of media and communication", Policy Briefing #10, BBC Media Action, October 2013, available at https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/policybriefing/fragile_states_policy_briefing.pdf (accessed 10 October 2019) (hereafter, Deane, "Fragile states").
 - 26 Deane, "Fragile states".
 - 27 Deane, "Fragile states".
 - 28 UNESCO Belgrade Declaration, "Support to Media in Violent Conflict and in Countries in Transition", Belgrade, 2004, available at <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/events/prizes-and-celebrations/celebrations/international-days/world-press-freedom-day/previous-celebrations/world-press-freedom-day/2009000000/belgrade-declaration/> (accessed 10 October 2019) (hereafter, UNESCO Belgrade Declaration).
 - 29 UNESCO Belgrade Declaration.
 - 30 Interview with Joel Campagna, OSF Regional Manager, 18 January 2019.
 - 31 For example, Radio Racja closed after several years in operation when donors pulled out, and one donor (OSF) could not sustain it on its own.
 - 32 For example, DVB's donors met regularly and co-ordinated their contributions; the annual Zimbabwe Partnership meetings were aimed at co-ordinating all stakeholders.
 - 33 Interview with Jane McElhone, former OSF Senior Program Manager, 29 January 2019; interview with Marie Struthers, former OSF Senior Program Manager, 29 January 2019.

Part II

Syrian exile media organisations and institutions

The Syrian media environment before the 2011 uprising

The role and dynamics of the media phenomena that took place after 2011 cannot be fully comprehended without considering both the specific context and time-frame. A brief overview of the media environment in Syria as it developed under the Ba'athist regime that seized power in 1963 is therefore essential to understanding the magnitude of the independent media's development after the 2011 uprising.

Indeed, the media landscape in Syria was extremely closed off, even in comparison to other Arab countries. Until the beginning of 2000, only state-controlled media were allowed to operate: the newspapers *Tishreen*, *Al-Thawra* and *Al-Ba'ath*, in addition to the official television and radio channels. The state news agency, SANA, was the main source of news, and provided guidelines on the content that individual outlets

should produce in relation to relevant political topics.

This system was a direct expression of the authoritarian regime imposed by the Ba'ath party in 1963 and by President Hafez al-Assad in 1970. Media outlets were supposed to reinforce the legitimacy of the “revolution of the above” of the Ba'athist regime. William Rugh, for example, defines the role of media in countries such as Syria as “mobilization press”, used to curb dissent but also to support a specific political discourse.¹ In Lisa Wedeen's view, the media in Syria were only an additional tool in the construction of the cult of Hafez and his son, Bashar al-Assad. In this context, media propaganda was not intended to be believed, but rather to help establish rules on what could and could not be said in Syria.²

The emergency law active since 1963 prohibits the creation of any space for freedom of expression. The red lines of public discourse are clear to anyone in Syria, even if they have not been officially published. The president and the main figures surrounding him, the general political system, sectarian divisions, sex and religion are all issues that cannot be discussed in public. The Ministry of Information closely monitors media coverage and directly contacts media outlets in the case of “misbehaviour”. The Syrian Journalists Syndicate, the only institution of this type, is directly controlled by the state and serves its interests rather than a professional one.

Following Bashar al-Assad’s ascent to power in 2000, his acceleration of economic liberalisation policies gradually affected the media field, too. Decree 50, branded as a “modernising” reform of the media sector,³ was presented on 22 September 2001. It allowed private media to operate officially for the first time. Some private newspapers, like *Al-Watan*, *Baladna* and *Syria Today*, television channels like Addounia, and radios such as Sham FM were established. All of these outlets were owned by businessmen close to the regime, such as Rami Makhlouf, a cousin of Bashar al-Assad, the owner of Syriatel and one of the richest men in the country. Private media did not enjoy more freedom than government media did. Quite the contrary: criticism emerged more often in state-owned media, often as an expression of the power relations between the Ba’ath party, the government and the presidency.⁴ FM radio stations were not even authorised to broadcast news content.

Moreover, the new law, while opening the field to private ownership, at the same time imposed new restrictions on the media. Private outlets were required to obtain a licence from the prime minister; they were forbidden to accept foreign funding; and they could be prosecuted on the basis of a “falsehood” or “fabricated reports”, or for endangering the “national interest”. Furthermore, the authorities could ask them to reveal the identity of their sources.⁵ The approba-

tion of the law also coincided with the end of the so-called Damascus Spring (2000—2001), when a window briefly opened for public debate and criticism of the political system.

Despite these restrictions, private media constituted a space in which a journalist’s professional identity could gradually emerge. While employees of state media were perceived (and often perceived themselves) as civil servants, their counterparts in the private sector started to experiment with work practices that were more similar to traditional media.⁶

At the same, the 2000s saw other changes at a regional and global level that influenced the local media landscape. The advent of regional satellite television stations such as Al Jazeera introduced new ways of producing and presenting information, sometimes forcing national media to modify their behaviour in order to compete. As in other Arab countries, Syrians increasingly turned to these channels for information. Access to the internet also began to spread throughout Syria, albeit less rapidly than in neighbouring countries. These technological changes created conditions for Syrian journalists to try to negotiate a greater degree of freedom with the regime, albeit with limited success. The Syrian government, on the other hand, took all possible measures to contain the ongoing changes. For example, correspondents working for international media had to hold Syrian nationality, in order to make it easier for the regime to control them.

The Press Law was amended in 2010 to include electronic publications. To prevent the emergence of a “blogosphere”, as had happened in Egypt and other neighbouring countries, bloggers were fiercely persecuted.⁷ Access to Facebook and other social networks was blocked. Syrians could still access them through proxy servers, of course, but they did not use them for political purposes until after the 2011 uprising. For these reasons, the Syrian approach to the internet took on a very different shape to elsewhere. In the mid-2000s, dozens of semi-offi-

cial news websites emerged. Less controlled than other media, platforms like Syria-News, Shukumaku, and DPress gave a younger generation of Syrian journalists space to start working outside the official media. In fact, some young journalists who today work for Syrian exile media began their career working for these platforms. However, even though these websites enjoyed more freedom than the official or private press, the authorities could still control them quite easily, channelling the anarchic nature of the internet into a limited number of outlets they could follow closely.⁸

In March 2011, Syria was still a “country of silence” — the expression often used by Syrian dissident intellectuals. The global and technological changes were contained, and absorbed by cosmetic, gradual reforms. The Arab uprisings erased the slow pace of change, leading to the complete transformation of the Syrian media sector in just a matter of months.

The 2011 uprising: the phase of media activism

When the uprising started in March 2011, it completely and suddenly changed the media dynamics. All the gradual changes that had been underway since the start of the previous decade were abruptly wiped out, paving the way for a completely new media environment. One month earlier, on 7 February 2011, the Syrian government surprised many observers (as well as the Syrian people) by lifting the ban on social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube.

Social media platforms immediately became privileged spaces for Syrian opposition activists to distribute and exchange information. All of the pre-existing media outlets — private, public or online — generally sided with the government, albeit to different degrees. For Syrian opposition activists, social media became the only option to express dissent. Digital activism was primarily managed by networked individuals. Some groups, like Shaam News Network, and pages created by local media centres, were also soon established.

This fragmented, individualised form of activism played a relevant role in giving visibility to the protests, in documenting the armed escalation, and in connecting people from different regions and backgrounds. Less often, social media were used to organise protests and other civil initiatives.

However, these forms of communication soon showed their limitations. The amount of content produced was overwhelming and difficult to filter. It often lacked technical and professional qualities, as well as contextualisation. Having been produced by individuals or by obscure parties, their authenticity was easily questioned. Exaggerations and fabrications occasionally took place, casting doubt on all of the content produced by Syrian anti-government activists.⁹

The escalation of the conflict exacerbated these problems. Many Syrian

media activists started to see the Syrian social fabric being torn apart by the same violent content they were producing in order to denounce the crimes of the regime. Syrian anti-government media activists, photographers and videographers started to debate internally about the negative effects of their own content.¹⁰

From the very beginning, the Syrian government banned foreign journalists from entering the country to cover the protests. When rebels started to seize territory from the government, foreign journalists began to return. However, they had to decide which side to be embedded with, possibly exacerbating the polarisation between opposing narratives. Moreover, it soon became clear to Syrian journalists that international media as well as regional media (such as from the Gulf) were exclusively interested in the conflict, and later in the “battle against terrorism” and ISIS. Other realities on the ground, starting with civil activities born amid the uprising, were almost completely ignored. It is in this context that a large number of Syrian media activists realised they needed to develop their networked media activism into more organised editorial work.

The idea to launch media organisations was seen by many citizen journalists as the only solution to the problems described above. The grassroots media content needed to be filtered, contextualised and packaged in a journalistic way, and that could only have been done with proper editorial processes. Moreover, the new media outlets, especially in the beginning, were born with the specific aim of shining a spotlight on civil activities at the local level, as well as on peaceful initiatives, to counter the media coverage that focused exclusively on the conflict. Other outlets began to focus more on cultural issues and constructive journalism, in order to fight the dissolution of Syrian society and identity as they knew it.¹¹

Media outlets started to mushroom in different regions. A few of them, such as *Enab Baladi* and *Souriatna*, had already started by 2011, but by mid-2012 hundreds of media organisations had been established.

Initially, Syrian journalists worked on a voluntary basis, seeing their editorial work as part of the wider civil movement’s activities. Most of them had almost no experience in the field. Gradually, the phenomenon attracted the attention of a number of European and US donors, media support organisations and NGOs.

A short history of Syrian alternative media

The history of Syrian alternative media can be roughly divided into three main phases. It is difficult to draw precise chronological lines between the phases. Nonetheless, we will distinguish between different periods of development of the emerging field, in order to offer a clearer picture of its history.

The beginning (2011—2012)

In this phase, Syrian media start flourishing in a disordered but lively manner. Most of the media outlets are created and operate inside Syria. The government does not lose full control of any region, and journalists have to operate in secret. Most media outlets operate on a voluntary basis.

This period is characterised by the first efforts to shift from media activism to a more professionalised style of media production. Some of the few media support organisations that had activities inside Syria before 2011, such as Deutsche Welle, BBC Media Action and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), decide to freeze their operations or to relocate them abroad after the uprising erupts.¹²

International media development organisations and donors do not yet play a relevant role. Two organisations step in first: Syrian Media Action Revolutionary Team (SMART)/Association de Soutiens aux Médias Libres (ASML) and Basma Syria. SMART/ASML is a French-based Syrian NGO, funded by the French government, among others. The organisation provides technical and, less often, financial support to a number of grassroots media. Basma Syria is a Syrian NGO launched in early 2012 and funded by Access Research Knowledge (see below). The organisation specialises in awareness campaigns and, in exchange for coverage on certain issues, it provides a small amount of funding to a series of media organisations. Both

organisations have a considerable role in providing initial technical and professional support, while direct funding is quite limited.¹³

In this phase, the media act as oppositional media, as a direct emanation of the Syrian uprising and in particular of the actors belonging to the peace movements. The belief that the regime will rapidly fall and usher in a transition to democracy is still widespread among activists and new journalists. All efforts focus mainly on content production; the objective is primarily to counter government narratives and mobilise people in the name of the Syrian revolution.

Attention in this phase is more on content production than on institution building, as the uprising is in its initial phase and hope still exists for rapid regime change. Within Syria, many Syrian journalists must remain hidden. Most initiatives are managed on a voluntary basis and by journalists aged 18 to 30. Only a slight minority have prior journalistic experience or studied journalism at university. The majority, however, started to produce content only after March 2011.

The boom: donors, institutionalisation and exile (2013—2015)

After their initial hesitation, international donors decide to support the emerging media sector more extensively. While before the uprising foreign support mainly targeted journalists working for official media and took place with the mediation of the state,¹⁴ now it is channelled directly to dissenting outlets born after 2011.

A wide array of actors begin operating in the field of media support, with different approaches and scales of intervention: Creative Associates International, International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), Access Research Knowledge (ARK), Media in Cooperation and

Transition (MICT), International Media Support (IMS), Internews, Free Press Unlimited (FPU), European Endowment for Democracy (EED), Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), Canal France International (CFI) and Coordinamento delle Organizzazioni per il Servizio Volontario (COSV). Funding is provided mainly by USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and the US Department of State Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, the European Commission, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), and the Danish International Development Agency (Danida). The French and British governments, according to some journalists, also provide some funding. Other relevant donors include Open Society Foundations (OSF) and UNESCO. The funding is used by media development organisations and NGOs both to directly assist media organisations and to provide training and coaching programmes on editorial practices, technical skills and institutionalisation.

As a result, Syrian independent media start to flourish. A study commissioned by IMS in May 2014 identified around 94 media outlets.¹⁵ According to another study, 268 newspapers and magazines had been launched since March 2011, only to be reduced to 61 in early 2015.¹⁶ A third study, published in 2016, identified 38 independent media, 71 pro-opposition media and 14 independent Kurdish media.¹⁷ A fourth, published in late 2016, refers to 600 outlets created since 2011, among them 42 radio stations.¹⁸

Until 2016, while some outlets were closing, others were being created, leaving the number of active outlets quite high.

Between 2012 and 2013, Syrian media organisations that are based in Syria start to move their main offices and core operations abroad. Those that do so in this period are generally funded directly abroad, too. This trend is pri-

marily a consequence of the escalating conflict. Syria is rapidly becoming one of the world's most dangerous places to be a journalist. In 2012 alone, 87 journalists, 48 citizen journalists and eight media assistants are killed.¹⁹ In the following years it does not improve. *Enab Baladi* has three editors killed in Daraya: Ahmed Shehadi, Mohammed Qoreitam, and Mohammed Shehadi.²⁰ Most of the journalists interviewed for this study identify the escalation of violence as their main reason for moving abroad, to a safer environment in which they could build more sustainable and organised structures.

Moving abroad does not particularly affect journalistic activity in this phase, however. The establishment of areas under the control of opposition forces, especially in the north, enables Syrian media to maintain a presence within Syrian borders. Networks of reporters and citizen journalists are rapidly established, as are small offices. Nonetheless, reporters inside Syria continue to face difficulties and pressure from the Syrian government and extremist groups alike.²¹

Most of the outlets move to Turkey — to Gaziantep and Istanbul, in particular. Gaziantep, given its proximity to the Syrian border, becomes a sort of media city for independent outlets. Journalists reporting from inside Syria receive regular training in Turkey, Lebanon and, less often, Europe.

Moving to safer locations abroad means procedures and exchanges between media development organisations and outlets are easier. Training, bank transfers and meetings are all much easier to arrange, too. The move also enables outlets and donors to work on the shared aim of creating stronger organisations. Syrian media are “pushed” towards better institutionalisation processes, in terms of legal registration, division of work, internal workflows, financial plans and sustainability. However, organisation-building emerges as one of the most challenging aspects that Syrian journalists have to manage. With few exceptions, they have

less success in developing institutionally strong organisations.

In the beginning, Syrian emerging media are mainly online newspapers and magazines. A few print copies are distributed locally. Funding from the United States begins in late 2012; it represents a turning point, as it enables the creation of a large number of radio stations. More than 20 stations will be created: Alkul, Alwan, ANA Press, ARTA, Fresh, Nasaem Syria, Sout Raya and Al-Watan are among the most important. Radio Rozana, funded by IMS, and Hawa Smart, funded by SMART/ASML, also begin in this phase.

Many Syrian activists and media-support organisations see radio as a particularly suitable medium for more easily reaching a wider audience at a reasonable cost. Most of the radio stations immediately establish their main office in Turkey, but have smaller offices and staff inside Syria to operate the transmitters. The FM signal is at times operated by a single radio station, though more often through organisations that provide these resources to more than one station. Between September 2013 and December 2017, MICT—Syrnet offers a shared FM signal to several stations. In March 2013, SMART makes another FM frequency available to different outlets, but in early 2014 decides to dedicate it entirely to Hawa Smart.

This phase also sees efforts to establish media institutions and stable collaborations: the Ethical Charter for Syrian Media (ECSM), the Association of Independent Syrian Radio Stations (ABRAJ),²² the Syrian Network for Print Media (SNP),²³ the Syrian Journalists Association (SJA) and the Syrian Female Journalist Network (SFJN).²⁴

The troublesome years of SEM (2016—2018): changing war dynamics, changing donor approaches and SEM's struggle for survival

In this period, a series of factors appear to endanger the Syrian independent media sector that emerged after 2011.

The intensification of the conflict and the emergence of extremist groups present a particular challenge to the efforts of outlets to reach people inside Syria, let alone to grow their audience. The distribution of printed newspapers in opposition-held areas is particularly hindered by Islamist armed groups. Installing a transmitter and maintaining an FM signal also becomes increasingly dangerous and costly. The internet is not always available, given the lack of electricity in several areas.

Moreover, since 2016, the Syrian government has gradually taken back the majority of the areas lost to rebel forces. At the end of 2016, the city of Aleppo returns completely to government hands. Media outlets operating in these areas, like the Aleppo Media Center, are forced to leave and often stop completely. The situation in rebel-held areas is little better. Raed Fares, the founder of Radio Fresh, is killed on 23 November 2018 (along with his colleague Hamoud Jnaid) after multiple threats to his life and other pressure.

Maintaining stable and widespread networks of reporters inside Syria becomes much harder, too. Most of the more experienced journalists decide, or are forced, to leave the country. Others are displaced internally, leaving some areas with little or no coverage. Local media centres in places such as Daraa and Eastern Ghouta close and often have to leave their content archives behind.

The change of context in the wider war also appears to have a direct impact on the donors' willingness to keep funding the sector as they did before. For example, the US funding, which was aimed mainly at strengthening moderate voices against extremism, starts to

decline as soon as the battle against ISIS appears to end. At the end of 2018, funding for Syrian radio stations operating in western Syria is almost completely cut.²⁵ Many stations are forced to close, as well as newspapers and other media projects. The number of operating outlets shrinks by the day.²⁶ The exceptions are in areas ruled by the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, the so-called Rojava, and the region of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor after the expulsion of ISIS. In these regions, US funding and, to a lesser extent, funding from some European countries is maintained because of their strategic relevance.

Syrian exile media: general considerations

Why “Syrian exile media”?

In this study we refer to the considered media outlets as “Syrian exile media” (SEM). We decided to use this phrase because, more than any other, it illuminates the radical changes the sector has gone through in the last two years. Most Syrian alternative media were not only forced to shift their operations abroad, they also had to accept the probability that this was not temporary, given the political context. Understanding this reality implies a transitional approach and requires the independent media sector to rethink its role in the future of Syria. At the same time, using the term “exile media” means also distinguishing them from “diaspora media”. Even if the considered outlets increasingly pay attention to Syrian communities abroad, Syrian journalists are all very clear on one point: their main focus is still Syria and their target audience is the population that still lives inside the country.

Contextualising Syrian exile media as tactical and critical media

Many other labels are used in academic or journalistic articles to refer to the type of media outlets we consider here: “alternative”, “grassroots”, “tactical”, “critical”, “oppositional”, “emerging”, “radical”, “independent” and “community”. Some of these definitions refer primarily to the media positioning vis-à-vis the related political system or society (“critical media”, “oppositional media”); others to their form of organisation and relation to the broader media environment (“grassroots media”, “tactical media”, “emerging media”, “community”); others to the geographic conditions (“exile media”, “diaspora media”). It is useful to discuss briefly some of these definitions and how they apply (or not) to the sector at the heart of this study, in order to have a better understanding of the phenomenon.

“Alternative media” is probably the most common and widespread definition. However, it is too broad and vague to be useful. As John D. H. Downing writes: “To speak simply of alternative media is almost oxymoronic... Everything, at some point, is alternative to something else”.²⁷ The same logic applies to the attribution of “independent”: from which forces (economic, political, social and cultural) should always be precisely described or the term risks being deprived of precise meaning. In fact, many Syrians refuse to be labeled that way, as they recognise the limits of the concept. At the same time, the term “independent” can serve to distinguish a group of media from other groups that are directly funded *and* controlled by clear political or economic interests. On this basis, for example, we exclude from this study outlets such as Orient News, which is owned by Ghassan Aboud, a Syrian businessman, or Syria Television, which is funded by Qatar. For the same reason, we exclude media platforms that are directly affiliated with armed groups such as ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra.

A term such as “emerging”, while often used by Syrian journalists, does not seem appropriate for a generation of outlets that are in some cases eight-years-old and have reached certain levels of journalistic production.

One term that helps us understand the nature of SEM is “tactical media”. Following Michel de Certeau’s interpretation of “tactical”,²⁸ we can highlight the fact that Syrian media are forced to adapt to strategic decisions taken by other, heteronomous spheres: political and armed actors in Syria, of course, but also political actors in host countries (i.e. Turkey, Germany, France, Lebanon, Egypt), and, to a different degree, donors and international media development organisations on which they depend for their survival. Syrian media organisations cannot act on a strategic level, but rather have to elaborate their

tactics in order to adapt to a strategic universe they cannot influence.²⁹

In another interpretation, “tactical media” is used by Geert Lovink to identify media productions that are non-ideological and yet have a clear political orientation and use tactics such as aesthetics, humour and the medium itself as a message.³⁰ This can be useful to identify outlets such as the Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution, SyriaUntold and other platforms that use non-traditional ways of communicating and storytelling.

Less useful are definitions such as “grassroots” or “community media”, which could have applied to the first phase of SEM development but do not today when these outlets tend to lose their hyper-local and civil, grassroots character in favour of more traditional journalistic practices. However, outlets such as Radio Fresh and ARTA FM can still be considered (and indeed consider themselves) “community media”.

Approaches based on the political positioning of the media can be useful, too. Downing defines “radical media” as “typically small-scale, generally underfunded, sometimes largely unnoticed at least initially” and serving two overriding purposes: “to express opposition vertically from subordinate quarters directly at the power structure and against its behavior” and “to build support, solidarity, and networking laterally against policies or even against the very survival of the power structure”.³¹

Even more interesting is the definition of “critical media” as described by Christian Fuchs. He dismisses a structure-based approach in favour of a product-based one. He maintains that the former would exclude those media outlets that aim to produce “radical” content while replicating the professional values and practices of more established media. Adopting the organisational structures and practices of mainstream media can in fact help radical media reach a larger audience, and thus have more impact.³² This definition can indeed serve as a reference to describe many of the media organisa-

tions included in this study, as a model they aim for. We think this label is more appropriate than, for example, “oppositional media”, which includes media outlets that base their main *raison d’être* on their opposition to the Syrian regime.

Media formats and typologies

SEM covers a wide array of media and forms of communication: printed and online newspapers, printed and online magazines, online news agencies, FM radio stations, online and satellite radio stations, and a few television channels. Most of these outlets rely only on online platforms and base their outreach mainly on social media (i.e. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter).

Several organisations have managed almost since the beginning of the conflict to print autonomously a limited number of copies to be distributed in local areas. This happened for a limited period, however, given the operational costs and dependency on specific funding. Moreover, when the outlets moved outside Syria, dealing with printing and distribution became too difficult. More effective were initiatives to put together different outlets. SMART/ASML provided a printing service for different organisations until January 2015. In 2014, the Syrian Network for Print Media (SNP) began to print thousands of copies to be distributed in northern areas under rebel control.³³ However, because of the difficult conditions on the ground and the lack of funding, the SNP stopped printing in July 2018. *Enab Baladi* stopped distributing its copies in Syria in August 2018, and today it only distributes 500 copies a week in Istanbul.³⁴

FM radio transmission followed more or less the same fate. As mentioned above, independent radio stations relied mainly on other organisations (MICT/Syrnet and SMART/ASML) in order to transmit. However, Syrian journalists always saw this option as temporary. Sharing the frequency with others was seen as a limitation on their ability to build a separate and specific editorial identity.³⁵ At the same time, as a mem-

ber of MICT points out, these radio stations often did not offer comprehensive coverage, and it made sense to combine their programmes.³⁶ Radio stations sometimes tried to manage their transmitters inside Syria autonomously, but in the long run it was prohibitive. Transmitters were often the target of air strikes. Rebel armed groups also began to exert considerable pressure, stealing technical material and forcing organisations to pay for their presence. Moreover, the FM signal was often too weak, because of the transmitters’ quality or location. When the regime began taking over most of the opposition-held territory, the FM signal was generally abandoned. The only radio station still transmitting in opposition-held territory today is Radio Fresh.

The geography of SEM

As mentioned above, many Syrian outlets began as community media, with a specific local focus: *Enab Baladi* in Daraya, *Ayn Al-Madina* in Deir ez-Zor, Radio Fresh in Kafr Nabel, *Oxygen* in Zabadani, *Souriatna* in Damascus. All of these outlets produced content about their respective communities and focused on them. This is inherent to the media organisations that emerged in different Syrian regions, but especially in the regions around Damascus and in the north.³⁷ Coastal and southern areas, which witnessed less mobilisation, were less concerned by the phenomenon.

Later, their exile conditions, professionalisation and technological changes all pushed most of the outlets to produce more national coverage. At the same time, SEM clearly tended to focus their coverage on opposition-held areas, identifying their audience as mainly living there. In addition, their reporters were for the most part also based in those regions.³⁸

The media landscape in areas controlled by the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria and by the Syrian Democratic Forces is different. As in the rest of Syria, after 2011, Rojava saw

the emergence of a new generation of media outlets: ARTA FM, Welat, *Shar* and *Buyer* are among the most important. As Kurdish forces led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) managed to keep the region relatively untouched by the conflict, media outlets could thrive with less difficulties there than in other regions. Even if the political situation is far from being fully democratic, the authorities give independent media some space for criticism and freedom of expression.³⁹

In Raqqa, a similar situation has emerged since the expulsion of ISIS in the summer of 2017. A new generation of media outlets, mainly funded by the US State Department, has started to flourish: Bisan FM, Shufi Mafi, Amal FM and Sawt Al-Raqqa (a project affiliated with ARTA FM) are among the most relevant.⁴⁰

In both regions, these outlets have the advantage that they can operate in a relatively safe environment, in terms of both the absence of violence and the legal background. Moreover, they can build a stronger relationship with their target audience.

The audience

Measuring the audience for Arab media, independent or not, is a particularly difficult task, and it became even more challenging because of the conflict. As such, this is a field that is particularly tricky to investigate, and the available data is quite scarce. We will try to identify the main issues and trends, relying on data that has been produced in the last few years.

The audience is one of the most challenging issues for SEM. Their scarce resources, coupled with their exile conditions and the difficulty of accessing the public inside Syria, have limited their capability to reach large number of readers, listeners and viewers. Indeed, their supposed “limited impact”, if only measured by available audience data could be, according to some, one of the reasons behind recent cuts to their funding.

Audience outreach is primarily a technical issue and, to a degree, reflects strong audience habits formed before 2011. In a study commissioned by MICT in 2014, it emerged that among Syrians, national and international TV channels were by far the most relevant source of news.⁴¹ Another study funded by several media support organisations in 2016 arrived at more or less the same conclusion.⁴² This is hardly surprising. Some international TV channels are very popular all over the MENA region. Syrian exile media are small organisations and cannot compete with mainstream media in terms of audience. Moreover, it takes time for any media outlet to reinforce its brand and expand its audience.

However, some positive elements should be highlighted. First, some media outlets, such as *Enab Baladi* and ARTA FM, managed to reach a considerable audience despite their difficulties. *Enab Baladi* boasts more than one million Facebook followers. According to one study, ARTA FM is one of the most popular radio stations in the cities of Amouda and al-Qamishli.⁴³

Another factor is the relevance of these outlets in relation to specific Syrian audiences both inside and outside the country: opposition activists and people who generally do not trust regime media; artists and intellectuals; and civil society actors that operate outside the sphere of government control. Despite their difficulties, SEM appears capable of giving a voice to these actors and of spreading information in these social environments.

Finally, the collaborations set up by several independent media with transnational and international media cannot be underestimated. *Sada al-Sham* was for a long period of time the primary source of content about Syria for the pan-Arab newspaper *al-Araby al-Jadid*. *Al-Jumhuriya* recently began to share the production and distribution of articles with a network of independent media in other Arab countries, like *Mada Masr* in Egypt and *Tiber* in Jordan. Another international collaboration was set with the French online publication *Orient XXI*. For a long period

of time, SyriaUntold collaborated with the international platform Global Voices and today provides coverage of Syria to the international platform Open Democracy, which is based in London. And the list goes on.

Moreover, according to new audience research commissioned by FPU and based on in-depth interviews inside Syria, some interesting elements are emerging. First, social media often represents, more so than television, an important source of information. Second, as a forthcoming study commissioned by FPU indicates, Syrians tend to have a critical stance towards the media in general, and demand more “independent” and well-sourced content.⁴⁴

In other words, it can be misleading to measure the relevance of SEM on the basis of the size of the audience they reach directly, especially in light of the current state of the conflict. These outlets are able, albeit not constantly, to reach a much wider audience through collaborations with Arab and international mainstream media. Increasingly, their content is quoted and redistributed by local, regional and international media using these outlets as a source. The list is very long and seems to be growing. It would also be misleading to evaluate their impact by comparing their audience to that of international media that have existed for a long time.

SEM should be considered “alternative” in relation to their audience too. They often tend to target audiences (Syrian, Arab and international) that, while small, have specific relevance. Within the Syrian public, they target primarily opposition groups, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), people who recognise themselves neither in Islamic ideologies nor in the regime’s narratives, people with a certain level of education, and journalists. Moreover, all media outlets tend to consider young people to be their main target audience, especially since they rely almost exclusively on online platforms.

In general, SEM appear to target more Syrians in areas that are or were under

the control of rebel forces, while less attention is given to the coast and other regions firmly dominated by the government. Some outlets, like *Rozana* or *Enab Baladi*, aim to produce content that addresses a larger audience, one that is less educated and has a less defined political orientation. Others, like *Al-Jumhuriya* or *SyriaUntold*, tend to target a more niche audience, one that is well educated and politically oriented.

At the international level, SEM tend to focus on NGOs, journalists, decision-makers and well-educated people with an interest in foreign affairs. Indeed, for some outlets, the international or regional audience does not play a secondary role. While the prospect of returning to Syria is seen as increasingly unrealistic in the short term, many outlets consider it particularly relevant to act as mediators between events on the ground and the international community.

Finally, the fact that these media outlets have been under constant threat and attack by various forces involved in the war indirectly confirms their relevance. Neither side in the war demonstrates tolerance for media content that is not under their control, and therefore uses all means at their disposal to prevent SEM's content from reaching their intended audience.

The editorial identity

It is difficult to pin a specific identity to the post-2011 wave of Syrian media. They communicate through different forms of media and target different audiences: local and national, women, children, youth, and so on. Gradually, all of the outlets have lost their initial local features and instead aspire to national coverage. The fact of being online, but also their efforts to distribute printed copies in different areas, increasingly meant that outlets lost their initial hyper-local features. Later, this tendency was further reinforced by the condition of exile and developments in the war, which made it increasingly difficult to operate on a local level. Few exceptions exist: *Radio Fresh*, for example, can still be consid-

ered a community/local radio station, focusing its activities in the Idlib governorate and, in particular, the surroundings of Kafr Nabel. Platforms such as *Al-Jumhuriya*, *SyriaUntold* and *SouriaLi* tend to target a well-educated public, and one that is not only Syrian.

Some outlets have tended to focus more on civil society and culture, others on political opinion, and others still on news about the conflict. Politically, all of the media outlets assume an anti-government stance, albeit with different nuances and positions. Moreover, their stance towards Islamist groups and identities can be quite different, with some outlets opposing them more than others.

At the same time, all of the media outlets consider themselves to be independent from any specific political actors, including the Syrian political opposition bodies. In the monitoring content produced by FPU, for example, it emerges quite clearly that SEM tend to perceive themselves as watchdogs of the Syrian people against any armed or political actors involved in the conflict.⁴⁵

In this sense, SEM perceive themselves and tend to act as "critical media", as Fuchs defines them, i.e. as outlets that produce "oppositional content that provides alternatives to dominant repressive heteronomous perspectives that reflect the rule of capital, patriarchy, racism, sexism, nationalism, etc. Such content expresses opposition standpoints that question all forms of heteronomy and domination. So there is counter-information and counter-hegemony that includes the voices of the excluded, the oppressed, the dominated, the enslaved, the estranged, the exploited, and the dominated."⁴⁶ Also, these outlets tend to refuse an explicit sectarian discourse, even if with different nuances.⁴⁷

When asked about their decision to set up media organisations, Syrian journalists typically have different answers. Syria needs professional and independent journalism, which neither the government nor transnational, pan-Arab media (i.e. *Al Jazeera*, *Al Arabiya* and their

sisters) can provide. Malek Haddad of SMART says that from the very beginning its ambition was to create a Syrian news agency capable of providing "reliable and credible" information.⁴⁸

One Syrian journalist said in an interview: "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 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.'"⁴⁹

Professionalisation is seen as the solution to two different but interrelated problems. One is the recognition that fragmented media activism had failed to garner enough credibility among the Syrian population. Indeed, many cases of disinformation and exaggeration had affected the credibility of opposition media activists.⁵⁰ Another was the challenge of creating a media system in line with the idea of a democratic, post-Assad Syria. The launch of media institutions such as the Syrian Journalists Association (SJA) and the Ethical Charter for Syrian Media (ECSM) has to be considered in this context (see the section below on media institutions).

Other outlets present themselves as a voice of civil society movements and Syrian people unrepresented in other media. Many journalists saw the creation of media organisations as an antidote to the polarisation and extremism of Syria's fragmented and too-politicised media activism.⁵¹ With the escalation of the conflict, international media increasingly focused on the conflict, and on actors such as ISIS, leaving many other issues uncovered. Many Syrian media were established with the idea of shedding light on Syrian society and local actors that lost their voice in the international media.

Syrian exile media organisations: the main issues today

Of the dozens of SEM created in the last few years, a significantly smaller number exist today. Several media outlets operate in exile: Aleppo Today, Rozana, SyriaUntold, *Al-Jumhuriya*, *The Syrian Observer*, Syria Direct, *Al-Ayyam*, ANA Press, *Enab Baladi*, *Souriatna*, *Sada al-Sham*, the Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution, *Ayn Al-Madina*, SMART News Agency, Radio Watan, Radio Alwan, and Radio Alkul. The following outlets operate in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria: ARTA FM, *Welat* (magazine and radio), ASO Network, *Shar*, *Buyer*, One FM and Jad FM. The following outlets operate in Raqqa and parts of Deir ez-Zor: *Jorf News*, Sawt Al-Raqqa, Amal FM, Shufi Mafi and Bissan FM. Finally, Radio Fresh is the only outlet whose main offices are currently located in opposition-held areas, in particular in Kafr Nabel.

While our study relies on literature and previous interviews with a wider array of media outlets, we focus in particular on several outlets from the first group: Rozana, SyriaUntold, *Al-Jumhuriya*, ANA Press, *Enab Baladi*, *Souriatna*, *Ayn Al-Madina*, Aleppo Today, *Sada al-Sham* and SMART News Agency. Our selection was based on their relevance in terms of audience, quality of journalistic output, or focus on specific issues and regions. The selection includes the most relevant exile media still in operation, but we also added some which, even while not fully functioning, we considered relevant in terms of their experience, the content they produced, and the audience they reached. Moreover, we decided to include ARTA FM not only because it plays a particularly relevant role in its region but also because its activities are to a large extent managed in exile. The media outlets operating in the so-called region of Rojava and in Raqqa are not considered, because they cannot be deemed media in exile and their situation is incomparable with the others.

Funding context and strategies

At the time of writing, some of the media outlets mentioned above face an existential threat. *Souriatna*, *SouriaLi*, *Sada al-Sham* and Radio Alwan currently lack a source of funding and are struggling to survive. Radio Fresh had its funding renewed after its editor-in-chief, Raed Fares, was killed in an ambush by unknown armed men on 23 November 2018, along with his colleague Hamoud Jnaid.

The closure of dozens of media outlets during the past few years was due mainly to a lack of funding. This was specifically the case of radio stations, which were previously funded mainly by Creative Associates and IREX through a programme financed by the US State Department. In the case of the Aleppo Media Center, developments in the war directly affected its survival odds, since its activities were strictly linked to the possibility of operating on the ground.

To survive, all SEM rely almost exclusively on donor funding and grants. In the context of the ongoing conflict, advertisements or content marketing do not constitute available options. Some efforts have been made to explore other forms of funding (e.g. content marketing, crowdfunding, donations), but more in view of future perspectives than as a viable strategy of survival today. Donors' shifting priorities during the course of the conflict and subsequent decisions by some of the biggest donors to prioritise other areas have had a significant impact on the survival of SEM.

At the same time, some outlets remain fully operational and others are trying to survive. We have identified four main elements that have played a role in the survival of media outlets.

Size of the organisation: some of the media outlets that have survived, with very few exceptions, are small organi-

sations. Their core staff typically ranges from five to ten people. Moreover, many media outlets do not have offices and can avoid fixed costs like rent and other overheads. Some tend to keep their core staff quite small, in order to remain flexible and adaptable to circumstances. They use small grants to produce more content, always avoiding burdening the core organisation with excessive costs.

Diversification of funding sources: A particularly relevant factor concerning survival is the capacity to secure funding, especially core funding, from more than one donor. This gives the organisation room to manoeuvre if one donor decides to withdraw, and at the same allows it to build stronger structures at the administrative and financial levels.

Many media outlets have tried, with limited success, to experiment with other sources of income, such as content marketing and audience donations. Other, more elaborate strategies are being planned, but have not yet been put in place. Even if these efforts generally fail and are intended to cover a small percentage of the budget, many Syrian journalists consider them a way to become less dependent on donors and to strengthen their entrepreneurial efforts, as opposed to being only passive recipients of external funding.

Public relations capacities: SEM operate in a global environment in which specific competencies are pivotal: communication with donors and support organisations, writing proposals, auditing processes, promoting the platform's image, building collaborations, etc. Media organisations that did not start with or could not provide the resources to manage these activities effectively had less chance of survival. If a project leader does not speak fluent English, for example, and cannot hire competent staff, it takes more effort to deal with NGOs, donors and stakeholders.

Some organisations were apparently able to tackle this issue through effective administrative and financial structures, but not all of them had the resources or capability to do so successfully.

Editorial identity: How outlets design their editorial identity and develop their brand also appears to play a relevant role. Since SEM cannot compete with mainstream media in terms of their audience and the amount of content they produce, their capacity to build a recognisable brand and offer specific services often helps them to attract funds and establish a loyal, if limited, audience. Indeed, SEM appear to have suffered from a homogenisation of content production (which wasn't helped by their large numbers at certain points).⁵² Moreover, many of them sought to mirror the mainstream media in terms of topic and type of coverage. Those that managed to differentiate themselves and carve out a specific place in the emerging media environment showed more resilience in the long term.

Exile and the legal context

All of the media outlets considered in this study have their core activities in exile. Currently, they mostly reside in three countries: Turkey (*Enab Baladi*, ANA Press, *Ayn Al-Madina*, Aleppo Today, *Sada al-Sham*, *Souriatna*, Radio Watan, Radio Alkul), Germany (*Al-Jumhuriya*, SyriaUntold) and France (Rozana, SouriaLi, SMART/ASML).

The higher concentration of SEM in Turkey is because of its proximity to Syria and the high number of Syrian refugees there. France, and more recently Germany, also host Syrian media mainly because of their relatively high number of refugees.

Most of the SEM considered in the study now have some form of legal registration in their host country. Legal registration responds to different needs. It is a way, often encouraged by support organisations, to ease financial and administrative procedures. It is also seen as part of the institutionalisation process, pre-

senting donors and other stakeholders with a more stable image of the outlet. Finally, it is a way to adapt to conditions in host countries, and to operate in a more transparent and stable way. In particular, registration is often the only way to grant work permits to Syrian journalists, who as refugees are otherwise subject to expulsion or other personal limitations.

In Europe, they are usually legally registered as non-profit organisations and associations. Media outlets operating in Europe have little choice in this regard, as they need a legal background in order to carry out bank transfers and other forms of economic activity. The Turkish context is more complicated. SEM started to register legally from 2014, in response to the feeling that Turkish authorities were putting more pressure on them. Until then, the government had turned a blind eye, not only letting SEM operate, apparently without any restraint, but also keeping the borders with Syria open. This enabled media organisations based in Gaziantep or Istanbul to operate in Syria almost as if they were based there. Today, almost all forms of SEM are legally registered, mostly as NGOs or, less often, as production companies.

However, registration still leaves them in a kind of limbo. Their NGO status does not allow them to produce media content. According to Syrian journalists, a media outlet can be registered in Turkey only if it produces content in Turkish and if the editor-in-chief holds Turkish nationality. As such, Syrian journalists describe their legal situation as extremely fragile, since the Turkish government could decide to end their activities at any time. They say they are tolerated, with the Turkish authorities allowing them to operate as long as they do not present a problem.

At the same time, Syrian journalists maintain that the atmosphere in Turkey has recently changed and that they feel more insecure about their situation. Since January 2016, it has been much more difficult for Syrians to get a visa to Turkey, creating an obstacle

when it comes to meetings and training sessions with journalists living in other countries. Moreover, movement between Syria and Turkey has been significantly restricted by securitisation of the border since October 2015. In 2017, more pressure was put on international and Syrian NGOs. In this light, some media organisations, like *Al-Jumhuriya*, decided to leave the country. Others, like *Enab Baladi*, registered in Europe as a precaution and in order to ease their financial operations.

Registering in Europe also enables an organisation to open a bank account. In Turkey, many journalists still have to use personal accounts, as opening one for an organisation would require it to officially employ staff and thus pay taxes on their salaries. For these reasons, some media organisations have decided to keep operating without legal status, and to avoid any official interaction with the Turkish authorities.

However, some journalists point out that operating without a licence means that employees cannot get work permits. Many Syrians living in Turkey possess only temporary visas and need a permit each time they want to travel from one city to another. In some cases (*Enab Baladi*, Aleppo TV), media organisations decided to register as a production company as well, in order to get work permits for members who need them, even if this means paying taxes on salaries.

In Europe, it is little different. Syrian journalists there are formally employed by their organisations as freelancers, and as a consequence have to pay taxes. This makes SEM salaries even less competitive in the media market, making it more difficult to hold on to more experienced journalists.

Editorial strategies and professionalisation

Thanks to training and coaching programmes, as well as the constant production of content throughout the last eight years, the SEM's level of journalistic production, albeit with discontinui-

ties, has generally substantially improved on several fronts: the use of sources, the packaging of content, and language. In this sense, the emerging Syrian media sector has constituted a relevant laboratory that enabled the emergence of a new generation of journalists coming from media activism and often lacking any experience in the field. New Syrian journalism cannot yet compete with international standards, but it can produce good content that is often used by international media organisations and that appears more transparent and impartial than most of the regional media focusing on Syria.⁵³ There is no doubt that most of the journalists working for these organisations perceive themselves *primarily* as journalists, not as media activists associated with a specific side of the conflict. In this context, the struggle against the government is seen as a necessary step in order to exercise professional and independent journalism. As one journalist noted: “Our struggle today is not against the regime alone; it is against any actor, including opposition armed groups that endanger the creation of a pluralistic and democratic society. This is our role.”⁵⁴

Moreover, many problems of quality coverage seem to depend more on structural limitations and the difficulty of covering the Syrian conflict than from a lack of professionalism.

Particularly important is the fact that many of these outlets gradually shifted from having an oppositional identity to possessing a critical media identity. Whereas before the aim was mainly to counter the propaganda of the regime and offer media support to revolutionary activities, today’s SEM are trying to carve out a role that goes beyond the current conflict and to establish a media sector that is capable of offering reliable and independent content.

At the same time, the rapid pace of change in the Syrian context, coupled with concerns about sustainability, difficult work conditions and their lack of experience, prevents Syrian journalists from engaging in more radical self-reflection about their role in the current

situation. As Soazig Dollet points out: “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.”⁵⁵ Today, broader editorial strategies still appear to be underdeveloped and often depend on the single editor, the writers who are available, and funding for specific themes.⁵⁶ Investigative reporting still seems somewhat weak, even if some valuable pieces are increasingly being produced, and most of the content still comprises news reports and feature articles.⁵⁷ Video production often appears to be perceived as a means of increasing viewership/audience, rather than as an integral part of the outlet’s editorial strategy.

Moreover, SEM tend to focus today mainly on the conflict, without paying enough attention to other issues.⁵⁸ The intensification of the war, in parallel with diminishing civil activities on the ground, has affected their role as “grassroots” media and as the voice of the emerging Syrian civil society. However, in the future, this can easily change, along with the de-escalation of the conflict.

Institutionalisation processes

One of the most relevant battlegrounds for SEM has been institutionalisation processes. Indeed, many Syrian journalists see this process as one of the most fragile.⁵⁹

The decision of Syrian journalists to invest in structure-building depends on different factors. The intention to imitate and take inspiration from traditional media structures is first of all a consequence of donor policies that geared SEM towards taking this path. This in turn is about easing the procedures between the support organisations and the organisations they are supporting (i.e. in reporting, auditing, financial issues, etc.). More importantly, this development is based on the realisation that institutionalisation is the only way to build viable and sustainable media organisations for the future and,

as many Syrian journalists emphasise, it is necessary in order to have a greater impact. As Fuchs points out, adopting the organisational structures and practices of mainstream media can in fact help radical media reach a larger number of people and have more impact.⁶⁰

SEM do not perceive themselves to be “alternative” outlets in the sense of elitist, niche outlets. Rather, their ambition is to create stable organisations that can compete with traditional and corporate media in the future. As one journalist puts it: “It is not that we do not want to reach a broader public. We want to arrive there. It is only that it is not easy.”⁶¹

However, the process of institutionalising SEM was probably the most problematic one. While it may be easier to transfer knowledge in other aspects of journalism, how to build an effective media organisation at the administrative and organisational level appears to be much more complicated. Moreover, while the practices of producing journalism can be more easily imitated and experimented with, this approach is more difficult at the level of internal organisation, given the limitations of human and material resources.

SEM have always had to improvise in terms of organisation. The difficult conditions of workflow and exile are certainly key factors in their improvisation. Another has been the lack of funding to fill relevant positions. Executive directors, financial and marketing experts, and funding managers generally cost more than journalists and have to be covered by core funding. According to journalists, it is also more difficult to find experienced figures available for these positions among Syrians.

Another problem is that the media organisations were usually built vertically around one or two main founders. In the beginning they were reticent to give away responsibility, partly out of fear of losing control of the project. However, this led to an accumulation of knowledge in the same people over a long period of time, making it increasingly

difficult to transfer responsibilities, even when there was a willingness to do so.

The policies of some donors also played a role in the current phase. Organisations that received more funding often became over-sized, and did not usually develop alternative and effective plans that involved downsizing their internal structure.

At the same time, there have been some steps forward. All of the journalists we interviewed realised that investing more in aspects indirectly related to their journalistic work is a priority. In fact, all of the media organisations that still operate today managed to build up, in different and often creative ways, an internal work division that covers properly crucial administrative positions.

In a constant state of emergency

Syrian journalists lament that they cannot build up long-term editorial strategies, as donors' funds mostly cover a one-year period, and contracts keep having to be renewed. As Badran points out, this makes them "tactical media" in the sense that they have to constantly adapt to a strategic universe that is set by more powerful actors, and in particular by host countries, donors and implementers.⁶²

The need to secure funding year after year, or even for shorter periods, also puts a lot of pressure on outlets, forcing them to act as "constant funding seekers". This sometimes forces them to follow their funders' priorities rather than their own editorial strategies. If there is funding available for specific issues and topics, the outlets have to tailor their content strategies to priorities outside their editorial line, i.e. adjust to donors' thematic priorities. For example, US media funding is often related to themes such as reconstruction, especially in regions like Raqqa or Rojava,⁶³ and the war against extremism and terrorism,⁶⁴ while other donors focus on issues such as gender or formats like investigative journalism and podcasts.

Another problem is that, while SEM's objectives are to create long-term, sustainable organisations, the demands that come with the funds are often tailored to short-term results. This contradiction has always forced SEM to invest in increasing production, and possibly outreach, sometimes at the expense of quality, especially of institutionalisation.⁶⁵

Moreover, many journalists lament the excessive bulk of documentation and reporting that comes with NGO grants and assistance.⁶⁶ Some journalists point out that the number of administrative staff in their organisation has gradually exceeded the number of editorial staff.

Turnover represents another challenge to institutionalisation processes. SEM cannot afford to offer salaries that compete with those of regional and international media. Many journalists have left Syrian emerging media to take more remunerative and secure jobs within more stable organisations. Other journalists have moved from one SEM outlet to another, because of better work conditions, personal reasons or other issues. When the SNP was established, it included a stipulation to hire journalists from other SNP members only after reaching an agreement with their previous outlet. The escalation of the conflict also had an impact, as many of the most experienced reporters inside Syria gradually left or were arrested or killed.

In each of these cases, all of the investment in terms of training and experience cannot always be effectively capitalised. This also affects long-term strategies and performance continuity, and creates an atmosphere of being in a constant state of emergency.

Collaborations

In the last few years, SEM have tried to establish different types of collaboration between themselves as well as with external partners. These collaborations took different forms: shared production, exchange of content, technical support, etc. At times, the idea of collaboration came as a result of spon-

taneous convergence, but from early 2014 in particular, media development organisations themselves pushed media outlets in that direction. This stemmed from consideration that these organisations were generally small and fragmented, and that better co-ordination would contribute to the more effective use of funding, especially to increased impact on the ground.

Media institutions like ECSM and the SJA can also be considered part of this effort. However, given their specific role and relevance, we examine them in more detail below. We focus mainly on two short-lived experiences that were nevertheless quite important "laboratories" in which to experiment with collaborations between different SEM.

The Syrian Network for Print Media (SNP), founded in July 2014, was the first initiative of this kind. It differs from previous collaborations that were anchored in collaboration between two organisations in temporary forms of interaction. The SNP gathered multiple organisations and was conceived as a separate entity. At the beginning, five newspapers were part of it: *Enab Baladi*, *Kulna Suriyoun*, *Tamadon*, *Sada al-Sham*, and *Souriatna*. *Ayn Al-Madina* and *Zaytoun* joined in 2016. The project was supported and funded by IMS from the beginning, and CFI joined after several months. The main aim of the organisation was to combine the activities of printing and distributing newspapers in Syria and Turkey. This enabled the organisations to optimise their costs and increase distributional outreach. For a period of time, they printed 7,000 copies per outlet. In June 2017, funding started to decline, however. Some 70 percent of copies were distributed in Syria, the rest between Istanbul and Gaziantep. The distribution relied on hundreds of locations, mainly shops and markets, in northern Syria.

The SNP also sought, albeit only partially successfully, to organise training and to reinforce the collaboration between the organisations involved. However, the funding ended and printing stopped in June 2018. Moreover, most of the founder organisations have

either closed or are considering doing so because of a lack of funding. Distributing copies inside Syria is almost impossible today.

Another significant initiative was the Association of Independent Syrian Radio Stations (ABRAJ), founded in November 2014 by six organisations: Alwan, ANA Press, ARTA FM, Hara, Nasaem Syria and Sout Raya. The aim of the network was to increase collaboration between radio stations and exchange technical information and editorial content.⁶⁷ Moreover, the initiative came as a response to what these stations saw as strong competitors in the field, in particular Rozana and Hawa SMART.⁶⁸ However, difficulties soon emerged, especially in relation to internal co-ordination and the identification of areas of collaboration and funding sources, and the project was short-lived.

Both the SNP and the ABRAJ showed the limitations of grassroots collaborations between independent media outlets. Apart from the lack of support, neither organisation quite managed to become an entity in its own right. Nasaem Syria abandoned the ABRAJ fairly early on and Radio SouriaLi, having been invited to join, decided not to, because it considered that it was not a profitable investment of its time.

Something similar happened to the SNP. “We understood only later that we needed at least an executive director, and to try to reinforce a separate identity for the organisation”, says one of the founders.⁶⁹

In both cases, the organisation managed these initiatives individually, without delivering enough responsibility to smooth out internal flows. Often, personal problems and misunderstandings emerged. Moreover, the difficulty in administrating these initiatives reveals the internal administrative problems of the single outlets and often overburdened individuals who lack the time and resources to invest in collaborative efforts. Both the SNP and the ABRAJ gave the impression to many journalists that they were not a priority.

Syrian exile media: the institutions

Starting in 2012, Syrian journalists began to establish media institutions, too: in other words, organisations that are not media outlets aiming to produce content, but rather entities seeking to provide professional and technical support to media producers. The establishment of media institutions also came as a response to the absence of proper ethical and legal frameworks for Syrian media, especially emerging ones. Particularly within the context of military escalation and the resulting polarisation and extremism, Syrian journalists and support organisations saw the necessity of providing platforms to design common rules as a point of reference, as well as professional and technical assistance. The activities of these institutions fall into three main camps: support for and protection of journalists; elaborating and monitoring common ethical guidelines for content production; promoting freedom of expression and enhancing journalistic professional standards.

We focus here on four institutions that play a particularly relevant role today: the Ethical Charter for Syrian Media (ECSM), the Syrian Journalists Association (SJA), the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), and the Syrian Female Journalists Network (SFJN). The first two were created by individual Syrian journalists or media organisations that came together to negotiate common professional grounds and defend common interests. They aim to build a self-regulatory system for a pluralistic and democratic media system. The SCM and the SFJN, created in 2004 and 2013 respectively, follow a different mechanism, as they are independent organisations. However, their main activities and objectives can be assimilated to the other two.

The Ethical Charter for Syrian Media (ECSM)

In 2015, six media outlets, with the facilitation of FPU, started a series of roundtable discussions about the possibility of

elaborating a charter of common ethical principles for Syrian journalism. From 2014, FPU and Internews jointly supported the initiative,⁷⁰ increasing the number of outlets to 13 and inviting the participants to discuss and agree on the values of the charter and their application. The Ethical Charter for Syrian Media was launched in September 2015 by 23 media outlets.⁷¹ They constituted the first signatories of the ECSM. According to Akram al-Ahmad, the current head of the Board Committee, the three main aims of the charter are: first, to promote the values of the founding document and invite new members to sign it; second, to push Syrian media to abide by its principles; and third, to mediate between Syrian journalists and Syrian media organisations when disputes arise.⁷² The charter is conceived as a collective tool to help journalists avoid stereotypes, warmongering and propaganda. Moreover, it is aimed at pushing SEM to abide by principles of accuracy, independence, fairness and responsibility. It includes eight main articles that cover media definitions, journalistic values and ethical obligations.

The Board Committee has also organised forums and training in Turkey and, previously, in Syria.⁷³

To date, 51 media outlets have joined the charter, but many have since closed, and today there are only 33 active members. The charter does not include media outlets licensed by the Syrian government, even if contacts have been established.

Membership is subject to four main conditions: being active for at least one year; producing news content; being Syrian; and being “independent”.⁷⁴ A specific committee examines candidates and decides whether to include them or not. In February 2019, the board approved new bylaws, including membership policies. This involved the creation of a system capable of receiving, filtering and examining complaints submitted by media organi-

sations, individual journalists and ordinary citizens. In the end, a decision is produced and published, and the ECSM can use it to mediate between the two parties.

In October 2019, a new board was set to be elected and a secretary general appointed. Future strategies will focus on ameliorating internal workflows; increasing the visibility of the organisation’s activities and role; establishing new partnerships; and diversifying the pool of donors.

The Syrian Journalists Association (SJA)

The SJA (or *Rabta*, in Arabic) was founded on 20 February 2012. A group of journalists started by discussing the idea of communicating at first remotely and later at a meeting in Gaziantep. A hundred journalists signed the founding document and elected the first board. The journalists worked mainly for regional, international and national media, and were based in different locations, but they all saw the need for an independent institution that was also an alternative to the Syrian Journalists Syndicate. Today, most of its members work for Syrian exile media, however. There are still a few journalists inside Syria, but most use fake names because of security problems. The SJA accepts as a member any Syrian journalist who can provide documentary evidence that s/he is still active. However, given the current situation, a more flexible approach has had to be adopted, offering more time to those journalists who, for different reasons, have had to stop working.⁷⁵

On 6 July 2013, the SJA was registered as a non-profit organisation in France, but its main office is in Gaziantep, given the number of Syrian journalists there. FPU and Internews supported the initiative following the first conference, with FPU later becoming the association’s only supporter.

The general objective of the association is to promote free, responsible and moral journalism in Syria. As such, the SJA is one of the promoters and initial signatories of the ECSM. As with the ECSM, it acts as a mediator between different actors when disputes arise.

The association's activities mainly cover two aspects: empowering and protecting journalists; and contributing to developing the professional skills of the association's members and the sector in general. The first aspect is managed primarily by the Syrian Center for Press Freedoms, a department of the association tasked with recording and archiving violations against Syrian journalists committed by all political and armed actors inside and outside Syria. Its reports are distributed to hundreds of human rights organisations, media organisations and NGOs. In addition, they promote these issues in other media through articles and interviews, and the institution advocates for Syrian journalists' rights with different international organisations, including the UN. Moreover, they recently launched a study of legal aspects of Syrian journalism, demonstrating the stark contrast between the laws regulating the press in Syria and those in other countries. The aim is to identify recommendations in relation to improvements to future laws and the legal background of Syrian journalism.

Finally, through a specific committee, the association identifies journalists in need of material and legal help. Given the limited internal resources, they promote the journalist's case to their international and Syrian partners in order to try to cover the financial costs.

The second field of activities takes the form of training on different levels and issues, in order to increase the professionalism of the entire emerging sector.

In all of its activities, the SJA collaborates with several international organisations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and, more recently, IMS. In January 2018, the

SJA signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Syndicate of French Journalists.⁷⁶

Its members being scattered throughout different countries presents several challenges. It is very difficult to organise meetings that everyone can attend. Moreover, journalists today work under different political and legal frameworks. Less problematic is the administrative level, as it is enough to have a board meeting every six months; and an executive director and a team manage all daily activities.

The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)

The history of the SCM predates the Syrian uprising. It was founded in 2004 by Mazen Darwish, a lawyer and freedom-of-expression activist. The SCM is registered in France as a non-profit organisation. Darwish was arrested on 16 February 2012, along with several members of the SCM, and only released on 10 August 2015. Between 2012 and 2015, the SCM continued to exist, albeit with less activity until it was relaunched in 2016.

The aim of the SCM is to support the creation of a united voice of Syrian civil society and media organisations, and to empower them to put pressure on the main power-holders. In this context, the SCM wants to become a hub for these actors and reinforce their voices in order to influence international decision-makers. In the short term, for example, this means pushing them to consider not only reconstruction but also transitional justice as a key aspect.⁷⁷ This role is reinforced by the fact that, since 2010, the SCM has had a consultative status at the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC), which grants it access to several UN meetings.

Today, the SCM has several diverse activities. After it relaunched its programme, the SCM was able to gradually secure different sources of funding and cover a wide range of activities.

The SCM focuses on three fields of activities: media and freedom, justice

and human rights, civil society and citizenship. Each field includes different programmes. Every programme (eight in total) has a project manager responsible for planning and implementation. A supporting department provides all of the programmes with whatever they need for aspects related to administration, financial management, IT, digital security, fundraising, development and logistics. The Department for Communication and Advocacy connects the programmes, designing general strategies and using the outputs produced by individual programmes to promote campaigns and transitional justice processes.

Though the organisation is still going through a reconstruction process, several programmes are already active. The Hate Speech Observatory, which started as an individual project in late 2017, will become a permanent observatory monitoring Syrian and regional media. The Journalist House aims to help Syrian media organisations become sustainable and more professional. The programme offers support to Syrian journalists, examining individual cases and submitting them to organisations such as RSF, Freedom House, the CPJ and IMS. Moreover, in 2016 it started to monitor violations against journalists, and to build an archive relying on material produced by organisations such as the SJA and the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) related to violations since 2011. Further activities will focus on digital security and a study of the legal framework of Syrian journalism.⁷⁸

For the Documentation programme, the SCM integrated the Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC).⁷⁹ It gave the VDC training to improve its methodology and analytical tools. Moreover, a new database is under construction, in co-ordination with HURIDOCS.⁸⁰

The Documentation team also serves as a primary source to the Litigation programme, which specialises in gathering evidence about human rights violations in Syria. After selecting a file, the Litigation programme has recourse to different sources and, in collaboration with

European organisations, brings cases to European or international courts.⁸¹

The SCM is dispersed across several countries, including Syria. Within that country it relies on a network of volunteers that it has built up over the years. Its only office is in Berlin, but no programme or department has all of its members in one place. The organisation is trying to improve its work flows on a general level. IFEX is supporting the SCM to become more sustainable and less dependent on donors.⁸² They are studying solutions to improve the legal status of employees in Europe and the Arab world. Moreover, the board, which consists mainly of representatives of international NGOs, helps the organisation in terms of visibility and fundraising.

The Syrian Female Journalists Network (SFJN)

The SFJN was founded in 2013 by two Syrian female journalists and activists. It is registered in the Netherlands as a not-for-profit association, and aims to provide a bridge between media and women, empowering them within media structures and at the coverage level.

According to one of its founders, the initial idea was to create a network for individual Syrian journalists. The emergence of Syrian independent outlets, however, convinced them to address these organisations in the first instance. A report that the SFJN produced in 2015 showed that women were under-represented in the independent media sector and almost absent in leading positions.⁸³

The SFJN does not produce content directly, but operates in collaboration with several Syrian independent media, providing training and workshops, promoting content with a gender perspective, and analysing media coverage. One of its main achievements has been the production of a code of conduct aimed at improving the image of women in the media.⁸⁴ In parallel, it has established a specific network of Syrian journalists, including men, living in different countries. In the last year, the organisation has launched Qalat, an open-source database of Syrian female experts.

The SFJN has also managed to significantly diversify its sources of funding. It has access to funding related not only to media but also to human rights and women's rights. Though its main office is in the Netherlands, it has staff members in Jordan, Syria, Turkey and the UK.

The dispersion of its staff, along with their condition of exile, are considered the main challenges the group faces today. Co-ordinating activities in different countries, adapting to different contexts, and not losing contact with Syria are main issues.⁸⁵

Media institutions: some general considerations

The development of media institutions is a relevant achievement in the context of shaping an independent and viable Syrian media system, even if they are today forced to operate mostly in exile. As elsewhere, the media institutions constitute a vital element of an ideal enabling environment. The Syrian independent media sector that now prevalently works in exile has two of the building blocks of the enabling environment. Indeed, it is a sector not just because it represents the sum of independent media outlets but because media supporting institutions are an integral part of it.

The creation of media institutions is a response to an effort to adopt a strategic view of media development, and acknowledges that operating only at the production level means being stuck with a tactical approach. Media institutions strive to provide a wider cultural, professional and social environment that individual media organisations need in order to operate more effectively, and not only as “alternative” outlets.

These efforts have had some success: all three organisations analysed above are still going and have managed to govern themselves amid very difficult conditions.

Signs of increasing collaboration between them are increasing too, especially between the SJA and the ECSM. The SFJN was also able to establish consolidated relations with several actors, and recently applied to be a member of the ECSM. At the same time, media institutions are exposed to many challenges, and their situation should be considered quite fragile.

One element of weakness derives from difficulties in the institutionalisation processes. The ECSM, for example, suffered from a lack of managed executive processes, i.e. a general secretary in charge of all the executive processes (as did the

SNP; see above). The absence of managed executive processes has not only affected internal workflows. In the process of institution building from below, a general secretary is a “political figure” or a person that needs to provide leadership. It is necessary to make the institution less vulnerable to the actions of its members, and to avoid conflicts among them.⁸⁶ Syrian media organisations, on the other hand, have to understand that they must give more autonomy to these institutions, with the boards taking a step back in terms of executive duties.

Media institutions also need to keep reinforcing their legitimacy. Since they are called to act as actors *supra partes*, they need to develop transparent and impartial internal procedures. In other words, they need to invest in internal workflows and organisations in order to enhance their credibility among their partners. The SJA, for example, developed quite complex procedures to elect the board, with an appointed election committee entitled to supervise all the procedures. The ECSM was not fully operational for a long period, mainly because of the absence of a general secretary, but the demand for its role, among Syrian journalists and media workers, stays intact.⁸⁷ It is an achievement that the media sector is guided by the ethical values voluntarily supported by a significant number of media organisations (i.e. outlets) and members of the ECSM, and that the ECSM acts as a kind of a self-regulatory body (mediating sometimes in cases of complaints). The SJA has also acted as a mediator in the case of an internal dispute within a media organisation. However, more needs to be done to connect the two institutions with similar institutions internationally, whereby exposure to best practices can serve the goal of continuing the development of these institutions.

In a context like Syria, in which different regional and international actors are trying to influence developments, these

institutions also have to defend their independence against powerful interests and influences. So far, they have managed to resist them, but they will need all the support possible, including by donors and international partners, against similar attacks in the future.

However, competition between institutions and the overlapping of their activities can present another problem for their future development and credibility. The latter, in particular, derives from very weak overall collaboration in the sector, where various actors are often unaware of what others are doing. The very uneven attention of donors creates the impression of preferential treatment being given by one institution, which may exacerbate competition and lead to the asymmetrical development of institutions, instead of strengthening the sector, and have unintended consequences. Each institution has a unique place and one should not replace or absorb the role of the other. Since 2016, when the SCM was relaunched, significant support has been given to this institution, which has an undisputed history of defending freedom of expression pre- and post-2011. It paid a heavy price as an institution and through the personal fate of its leaders. It is understandable that the specific history of this institution and its reputation has attracted funding and attention. However, the fact that both attention and funding have not been spread evenly has led to uneasiness among media organisations and institutions launched after 2011. Moreover, the SMC is in fact an independent organisation, not an institution created from below by journalists. Communication between the SCM and other actors sometimes appears weak, and some projects overlap.

Syrian media actors, as well as donors and NGOs, often tend to initiate similar projects and initiatives, without substantial co-operation. In the long run, this can have a negative effect on their relationship, reinforcing an atmosphere

of competition rather than collaboration. It can also affect their credibility with donors, NGOs and media partners. Engaging separately with similar projects should be avoided; instead, they should explore collaborative ways to merge their efforts or design projects in a more complementary way that would be beneficial for all actors.

International donors and media development organisations

The involvement of donors and media development organisations in Syria precedes the 2011 uprising. In fact, it started with the limited opening of the Assad regime. However, media development represented only a marginal part of the overall development aid programmes carried out at that time, which was characterised by the prevalence of less controversial programmes. In fact, all of the in-country programmes had to be agreed and authorised by the ministries in charge. Until the security situation worsened, many donors worked directly with the Ministry of Information on media reform. A few donors opened up to supporting programmes in a way that bypassed official endorsement by the authorities. The main features of donor-supported programmes before 2011 and in the immediate post-2011 period was that they lacked long-term objectives and were mainly focused on training individuals, with no associated vision on building local institutions.⁸⁸ Moreover, the media development organisations that started supporting online initiatives in the immediate post-2011 period kept their programmes confidential because of the risks to those involved. Co-operation efforts were only launched in 2013 with the Global Forum for Media Development (GFM-D)-led Syria co-ordination.⁸⁹

Between 2011 and 2016, a wide range of media development efforts by international media development organisations

has taken place focusing on the professional capacity-building of individual journalists and media outlets, media content production, and reactive physical and online safety measures. The only examples of media development interventions that have taken a view of the sector's development are programmes by IMS and FPU. These programmes include a diverse spectrum of actors encompassing institutional support to media organisations and the development of media institutions (i.e. the SNP, SJA, ECSM).

International media development organisations indicate that far fewer resources have been available for Syria since 2016. While only a few years ago 14 international media development organisations had Syria-related programmes, today only a handful of them are still active. Some donors share the observation that the priorities have changed in the region as a whole and in Syria in particular. Some define this shift, where it exists within a donor, as a “securitisation” of the agenda, whereby in the case of Syria the fight against ISIS and associated counter-terrorist narratives in the wider framework of “countering violent extremism” has taken priority over independent media-sector development. It is a paradox that, at a time when actors within the independent media sector in Syria made significant professional improvement in terms of both content and organisation (i.e. management, sustainability considerations), the sector has had to reverse its developmental objectives and focus purely on survival once again because of declining donor funding.⁹⁰

Examples of active donor support are few and far between. Among others, the US State Department's Near Eastern Affairs programme — Support for Independent Media in Syria — was launched towards the end of 2012 and is currently implemented by IREX. The programme initially focused much of its assistance on providing equipment to radio networks, while it now assists several FM radio stations that broadcast into Syria (some with headquarters in Turkey; some based in Syria) in a more

holistic manner by providing targeted training, audience research, etc. More recently, the programme also assists one online platform and a TV station.

European NGOs with funding from European governments have similarly supported Syrian media development projects that they have initiated, but their short-term approaches have allowed support to lapse, resulting in a sudden halt to certain projects. However, Scandinavian donor countries present an exception in this respect by supporting programmes aimed at the development of the independent media sector from the beginning of the conflict until today.

Among the leading training programmes that have run at different times over the past few years, examples include those conducted by Free Press Unlimited (FPU), BBC Media Action, Canal France International (CFI), SMART, the German-based Media in Cooperation & Transition (MICT), and the Italian-based Coordinamento delle Organizzazioni per il Servizio Volontario (COSV). Some of those organisations are no longer active in Syria because of a lack of donor funds, while others have maintained a very low level of involvement for the same reason. In general, one can see the clear reluctance of some European governments to fund Syria-related media projects at the moment, at least until the situation becomes more predictable.⁹¹ There are, however, signs that some may expand the programmes or potentially start new programmes in areas of Syria that have recently been liberated from ISIS, as some governmental donors prioritise those areas.⁹²

Several European media development organisations, like FPU and IMS, have maintained relatively stable Syria portfolios. Funded by the Danish, Norwegian, Swedish and British governments, IMS has since 2011 established a full-scale Syria portfolio within its MENA programme which provides institutional support to a chosen number of Syrian media; content production support; organisational development with an emphasis on sustainability; networking and dissemination; and safety. FPU,

IREX, UNESCO and IMS maintain a certain level of co-operation.

According to one 2016 study, “the State Department has acknowledged that support for Syrian media is now a long-term matter, and adjusted its bureaucracy accordingly”.⁹³ Evidence of a policy shift has yet to be seen, as the flagship project has no guarantee of continued funding beyond summer 2019.⁹⁴

The European Council adopted the EU Strategy on Syria in 2017;⁹⁵ it aims to “promote democracy, human rights and freedom of speech by strengthening Syrian civil society organizations”. Within this framework, the council “agreed to increase EU efforts to promote free speech, including through supporting free and independent media”.⁹⁶ However, neither the international and European media development organisations nor the Syrian independent media organisations have confirmed that funds are available for media development as a result of this strategic framework. Prior to 2017, the EU was a significant donor and its absence since then has had quite a disruptive effect on media development efforts. It has left international and Syrian organisations that took part in a consultative process before the endorsement of the 2017 strategy confused as to why support for free and independent media did not figure more prominently in the EU Strategy on Syria. The lack of clarity about how this strategy is being made operational feeds into widespread concerns that, despite modest mentions of the free and independent media, implementation is more than a step away from “promoting free speech, including through supporting free and independent media”. According to the available information, the EU is involved in the creation and support of a platform to give Syrian civil society organisations an unmediated voice, which is thus intended to provide a middle ground and appeal to Syrians across the board.

Syrian media actors echo the growing dissatisfaction with the approaches of the international donors that are felt to be in constant dissonance with the

needs of the sector, and fail to recognise its importance throughout the conflict and post-conflict period. Shifting donor priorities, short-term approaches and an overall lack of donor alignment as to the role of media development in Syria all pose a challenge for Syrian media organisations seeking to shape their mid- to long-term development strategies. Paradoxically, they also force them to focus on survival issues again and again, with many being forced to close or significantly downsize their operations.

Several private and foundation-based donors (e.g. Open Society Foundations, the European Endowment for Democracy, the National Endowment for Democracy) remain flexible donors to a certain number of independent media organisations. However, they alone cannot fill the funding gap and meet the needs of the entire sector, nor do they have projected comprehensive strategies for sector-wide support.

GFMD Syria co-ordination

Syria co-ordination under the GFMD's framework was launched in 2013. Between 2013 and 2016, a number of meetings took place, starting with the international media development organisations, who were joined by the Syrian media representatives as early as 2014. During 2014 and 2015, meetings in Istanbul were attended by as many as 60 participants representing three groups of stakeholders. In 2015, a White Paper called "A Call for Effective Support to Syrian Independent Media as a Key Component in Mitigating and Resolving the Syrian Conflict" was completed and served as the basis for advocacy meetings in Washington, D.C. and Brussels — the first steps in joint advocacy. Since the second quarter of 2016, co-ordination in its full scope has been stagnant.

The idea of closer Syria co-ordination among international media development organisations within the framework of the GFMD was proposed by IMS in early 2013 at the GFMD meeting in Paris (organised in parallel with

the UNESCO conference taking place in the French capital).⁹⁷ The reasons were manifold and included:

The Syrian civic protest and peaceful movement, which coincided with similar movements and upheavals in the Arab world in 2011, began to rapidly evolve into a conflict/war of unprecedented scope and complexity. The fast-changing situation on the ground was certainly too big a task for any individual media assistance actor to follow and assess.

The media landscape was changing at an equally rapid pace, triggering a "media earthquake". No individual media development organisation could keep up with the speed of these developments and the magnitude of the needs, nor could any organisation acting on its own build credible knowledge of the entire emerging media scene.

Syrian media actors often acted in isolation from one another, while some networks established before 2011 found themselves under extreme pressure from the regime (e.g. the SCM), which significantly reduced their ability to continue acting as focal points.

The nascent Syrian media scene was as fragmented as it could be; so were the interventions by international media development organisations that basically took place without their having any idea about the extent to which their efforts met needs on the ground and how they would play into a fast-changing local situation.

In such conditions, the GFMD's Syria co-ordination presented a real opportunity to become a mechanism for information-sharing and lessons learnt among international media assistance groups; create more comprehensive understanding of the changing Syrian media sector; provide a venue for international media assistance groups and local organisations to meet and develop a better understanding; provide a venue for Syrian media to get to know one another better and start perceiving itself as a sector; provide a venue for Syrian media to formulate their needs; provide a venue for

international media assistance groups and Syrian media actors to formulate a strategic approach towards overall media assistance to Syrian media and make a case for media development in Syria as an integral part of international development strategies for Syria; and inform and influence donors' policies towards assistance programmes in Syria.

Most participants of the Syria co-ordination see its "peak" years as 2014 and 2015, which coincides with the relatively steady inflow of donor funding and the hope that "pure survival issues" could be replaced by "the view to long-term development". With 2016 representing a turning point, in as much as Syrian independent media development as well as international media development organisations faced a significant lapse in donor funding, co-ordination has since waned. Several consultative meetings took place in 2017 and 2018, but they failed to revamp the process. Looking back, however, there were several acknowledged achievements: in spite of initial reluctance on the side of some international media development organisations — members of the GFMD — the process was given a try and launched in early 2013; it increased the level of information-sharing and the collective effort to deepen knowledge about the media environment as well as about what could or could not work in a given environment; it brought a significant number of Syrian stakeholders into the process; the process tried to promote the need for a strategy; it provided space for Syrian actors to meet and network with international counterparts and among themselves; and it generated research (e.g. several media-mapping studies; an audience survey), while the White Paper provided a basis for advocacy.⁹⁸

Beyond the war — trends presenting obstacles and opportunities for Syrian independent media organisations

Neither the conflict nor post-conflict frameworks can be generalised. Understanding the context is crucially important, as the drivers of conflict differ. The post-conflict context can encompass many features with differing intensity in different places like prolonged violence and fragility. Moreover, it can be marked either by heightened authoritarian tendencies or by the ambition to create conditions for lasting peace through the strengthening of democracy — depending on wider trends pertaining to the region, the pre-war situation in the country and the dynamics brought about by the conflict itself. An emphasis on context-sensitive approaches can help avoid generalisation and donor interventions based on templates that are hardly replicable in different conflict and post-conflict environments.

Global and regional trends in freedom of expression

These trends are relevant for the future of independent Syrian media, because once the country emerges from its long and brutal war, the post-war developments will take place against a backdrop of increasing hostility towards independent media, journalists and civil society, both globally and regionally.

The global trend of diminishing freedom of expression has been documented in the latest reports by several prominent organisations. According to Freedom House, press freedom is in its worst health in 13 years.⁹⁹ The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reveals that the number of journalists jailed for their work is at its highest level since the 1990s.¹⁰⁰ Reporters Without Borders (RSF) reiterates this finding: “The climate of hatred is steadily more visible in the Index, which evaluates the level of press freedom in 180 countries each year. Hostility towards the media

from political leaders is no longer limited to authoritarian countries such as Turkey (down two at 157th) and Egypt (161st), where ‘media-phobia’ is now so pronounced that journalists are routinely accused of terrorism and all those who don’t offer loyalty are arbitrarily imprisoned. More and more democratically-elected leaders no longer see the media as part of democracy’s essential underpinning, but as an adversary to which they openly display their aversion.”¹⁰¹ The V-Dem report, which examines the state of democracy worldwide, shows a downward trend in democratic progress especially since 2010.¹⁰² The same report notes that media freedom is at its lowest level since the turn of the century. Indicators on government censorship of the media, media corruption and bias, lack of media pluralism and self-censorship show alarming declines around the world, with a notable increase in government censorship of the media.¹⁰³

Regional trends

a) Regional trends presenting obstacles to independent media development

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is the second-worst region for press freedom, where out of the region’s 20 countries, 16 are classified as “not free”.¹⁰⁴ The Middle East’s countries are yet again at the bottom of RSF’s World Press Freedom Index, too. In its 2018 index, RSF notes that: “According to the indicators used to measure the year-by-year changes, it is the Middle East/North Africa region that has registered the biggest decline in media freedom.”¹⁰⁵

While the negative trend in the MENA region is consistent with a globally negative trend, it is not merely a consequence of the global trend. The major

drivers of the trend in the MENA region are only partly externally driven by the region’s conflicts; however, the major drivers originate from the re-consolidation of authoritarianism that varies in intensity from one country to another — and helps explain why the chances for this trend to be reversed in the short- to medium-term are very slim. Dissenting voices in the media are increasingly silenced through the use of legal and extra-legal means under terrorism charges, “deeds against national interest” and so on. Smear campaigns and false information about prominent professionals are orchestrated by a number of media aligned with the government in an effort to alienate and defame them. Non-state actors of various provenance aim to mobilise more conservative social strata, which can incite violence against journalists and freedom of expression/human rights defenders. Even when a direct link with the regime cannot be established, this kind of “public lynching” and the use of fake information goes unchallenged by the authorities.

Independent media across the region are caught in the middle of these negative trends while trying to provide quality journalism and diverse and pluralistic coverage of a wide range of topics. Most of the already established media, as well as emerging initiatives, have to compete on unequal ground with the massive state-owned media sector on the one hand and a significant private sector media on the other hand (with the latter abiding by the state’s “red lines”). In other words, both the state and private media sectors are heavily subsidised and enjoy preferential status in a politically controlled advertising market. A handful of independent media in the region struggle to find a model of sustainability, as their counterparts in the developed world attempt to do, but in a radically different environment.

Thus, the most persistent challenges posed to independent media in the MENA region include: hostile political environments with state and non-state actors presenting threats; unreformed media systems and a general lack of legislation enabling media development; dysfunctional media markets and associated advertising, coupled with an economy in dire straits; constraining investment regulations; and wars and large-scale conflicts.

b) Regional trends presenting opportunities

A trend with long-term transformational potential, particularly affecting younger populations, is “digital disruption”. The Middle East has one of the world’s fastest rates of digital technology adoption. People in the MENA region spend on average more than five hours per day online, mostly on various social media platforms. Given the region’s large proportion of young people, its populations are forecast to continue favouring digital platforms. One of the main conclusions of the Arab Media Outlook 2016—2018 is that the region’s media landscape is undergoing a paradigm shift driven by its developing infrastructure and consumer behaviour.¹⁰⁶ It points to two factors as providing an impetus for growth: youth demographics and the increasing level of digitisation.

The rapid evolution of access or connectivity — thanks to smartphones, tablets, apps and infrastructure — is driving digitisation. Smartphone penetration is rising rapidly and is not only limited to the more developed countries in the region. Internet and broadband penetration has increased and, like most emerging markets, it is mobile-centric. The number of mobile broadband (3G/4G) users exceeds fixed broadband, which is why analysts forecast MENA countries to become “mobile-first” markets.¹⁰⁷ This is evident in the growth of website views on mobile phones, which jumped from 11 percent in 2011 to almost 70 percent in 2015. Such access is creating new consumer behaviour, which in turn presents new opportunities and challenges.

Furthermore, the increasing trend of media consumption on social networks and the growing popularity of short-form video content are driving a culture of “media snacking” across the region. With the majority of time spent on social networks and mobile videos, digital constitutes 40 percent of their attention span with 80 minutes and 28 minutes of time being spent on social networks and video respectively.¹⁰⁸

A comparative analysis of the penetration rates of different social media networks in the Arab region shows that Facebook remains the most popular social media platform. Collectively, the number of Facebook users in the Arab region has steadily increased over the past six years, as per the findings of the Arab Social Media Report series,¹⁰⁹ reaching more than 156 million in 2017. In seven out of 22 Arab countries, the number of Facebook accounts exceeds the regional average: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Iraq, Morocco, the UAE and Syria.

The Arab Social Media Report 2017 also describes some other trends across different social media (relevant to content producers):

The Arabic language is increasingly dominating social interactions online, as these channels are becoming the de facto form of interaction for most people in the region. This is a departure from the earlier stage of growth, where this was merely the interaction medium of the “elites” in most societies. On average, the rate of using Arabic in social media activities is 55 percent, up from 43 percent two years ago (on Facebook), while 72 percent of all tweets in the region are now posted in Arabic.

Access and use of social media are no more limited to the youth in Arab societies. Users are increasingly maturing in age. On average, 64 percent of social media users in the region are under 30. However, this percentage has slightly but consistently decreased over the past six years, where early adopters of social media in the region are maturing. There is a noticeable and steady

increase in the number of users above 30 in the past six years.

The trends above are relevant for Syrian media, regardless of whether they are digital-only or use multiple platforms. In that regard, they are well positioned as to regional trends, as they are mostly part of the same generation as their target audience and are tech-savvy, so have the potential to tap into their audience’s changing preferences and habits. To turn these potential advantages into certain benefits, the media in question need to be well connected with their natural professional community around the world in order to share with or benefit from innovation and good examples of efforts in the search for viable business models.

Developments in Syria, 2011—2018

Pre-war Syria, as discussed in previous chapters, had all of the characteristics of authoritarian rule, and constituted an environment that was not conducive to media freedom and freedom of expression. While it is difficult to predict post-conflict developments, one can safely argue that neither the nature of the processes preceding the war nor the nature of those that have evolved throughout the war provide grounds for optimism. It is highly likely that independent media and institutions will face extreme challenges emanating not only from political circumstances but from economic circumstances on the ground, too.

In regime-controlled areas, the government continued its crackdown on dissidents but also demonstrated brutal force against civilians. In areas outside government control, it has been possible to observe a political process with the characteristics of democratic structures in Kurdish areas only; however, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), with its military arm, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), has also shown authoritarian tendencies. In rebel-held areas, citizens are subject to violations of their rights by those who are in control locally. It seems that neither side

in the war has managed to deliver better political or economic conditions for civilians.

The Syrian economy is widely destroyed and fragmented. “By the end of 2015, the Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR) calculated a total economic loss amounting to 468% of the Syrian GDP in 2010. The GDP has lost around 64.1%... UNDP further estimates a poverty rate of 85.2% of the population, 69% thereof in extreme poverty.”¹⁰ Corruption and patronage networks have become even more widespread than they were before 2011. According to the SCPR’s report, the structures of crony capitalism and nepotism that dominated the country before the crisis have deepened, and subsequently the actors dominating the economy have partially shifted loyalties. It is estimated that nine Syrian businessmen control about 90 percent of the domestic economy.¹¹ Finally, external political actors, particularly Russia and Iran, have become more influential. The scope of the Syrian regime’s dependency on external political actors assures considerable space for their influence in shaping Syrian policy.

All these trends considered, it will be a huge challenge for the independent media sector to survive and reach a sustainability breakeven point in the face of both political and economic circumstances.

SEM in the future; post-conflict

It is extremely difficult to predict how the Syrian political context will develop during the next few years. It is improbable that the conditions for SEM to go back on their own terms — i.e. guarantees of journalists’ well-being and a certain level of freedom of expression — will be met in the short- or even medium-term. Similarly, it is difficult to believe that the country will soon enjoy a certain level of stability. Terrorism, social tension and repression will probably characterise the country for years to come.

In this context, being in exile presents some challenges, but also some opportunities.

Being in exile will offer SEM more stability and the chance to develop sustainable models of survival. If it is true that presence on the ground provides a media organisation with the advantage of proximity to its audience, it is also true that today new technologies enable exiled organisations to easily reach their audience inside Syria. This factor was until now undermined by the conflict. Electricity cuts, armed clashes and forced displacements weakened the internet as a primary source of communication. De-escalation of the war can significantly change media consumption in the future, giving SEM more opportunity to compete for a larger audience. Moreover, a post-conflict situation will enable Syrians to further stabilise their sources’ networks inside the country, which is already happening. Even if these sources have to move in an unofficial way and undercover, and thus sometimes have limited access to information, they will probably be more able to provide regular content than they did during the conflict.

It is highly possible that political polarisation will leave room for a more nuanced and grey-scaled political atmosphere. There are already strong signs of dissent among constituencies that, during the war, lined up strongly with the regime. Regime media began hosting more critical content from the beginning of 2011 and, according to many Syrian journalists, this tendency seems to be reinforced.

In this context, SEM can play a different role and address audiences that were previously inaccessible, either for technical reasons, because of their political orientation, or simply because of the conflict.

The closure of a large number of media outlets, often without an exit strategy, represents a major loss if we see it through the eyes of those journalists who struggled for years to keep them alive. At the same time, a drop in the number of active media organisations was predicted. Moreover, the experience accumulated by individuals is not being wasted. Syrian editors, video pro-

ducers, reporters, writers and photographers often manage to redistribute themselves among surviving outlets. Others are hired by prestigious regional or international media. Some pursue individual paths as artists, film directors or novelists, sometimes acquiring considerable regional and international recognition. All these human resources are still available to SEM, as they are still part of the same networks. In the future, more stability and resources could enable them to reabsorb part of the human resources that, for the moment, had to go elsewhere, often against their will.

Finally, a strong SEM network combined with the elements listed above will enable Syrian journalists, media development organisations and donors to let go, at least for the next few years, of a “transitional approach” to the role of the media. Until now, media development strategies and tactics have been tailored to the idea that these outlets had to be prepared for their more or less imminent return to Syria. We have to recognise that this idea relied on assumptions that would not survive a reality check today, given the likely situation in the immediate post-conflict period. Even if they could go back to Syria, the sustainability of independent media would be a very difficult outcome to achieve.

In this context, SEM can be a stable actor that develops independently from the political instability and setbacks that will probably characterise the future Syria. Rethinking their role, impact and strategies in this context, they can offer all of the involved players, from journalists to donors, a more realistic, controllable and effective framework.

Concluding remarks

Between 2011, when the Syrian alternative media organisations began to emerge at a sudden and chaotic pace as a form of media activism, and 2019, a remarkable effort has been made to shift from media activism to more professional media production. Today, Syrian alternative media organisations cover a diverse spectrum of media: newspapers, radio, online and TV. Some define themselves as niche media (as per their target audience), while others attempt to reach a nationwide audience. The media institutions range from freedom of expression organisations, to professional associations, to organisations targeting specific issues and audiences. Though some among them were launched in exile in the early days following the 2011 uprising, the situation on the ground continually forced many into exile, reaching a peak in 2016 when it became almost impossible to fully operate from within Syria.

The Syrian alternative media organisations represent a distinct sector comprising diverse media outlets and professional and freedom of expression organisations that are founded by individuals with no links to political or other interest-based groups. Furthermore, these media outlets and institutions formulate their mission on professional values and favour an output of quality journalism. Most of the media organisations in question have embraced the importance of institutional/organisational development, but they vary in their degree of organisational development. In terms of ownership and content, they represent an independent sector.

The development and professional growth of these organisations has been supported by donors and media development organisations with varying intensity throughout the past eight years. Paradoxically, at a time when strong professional and institutional consolidation requires further support, it is significantly less available and, as a result, many media organisations have closed or considered doing so. A num-

ber of media organisations have tried to adjust their strategies to survive the crisis, while maintaining their professional achievements. The independent media sector is at a crossroads. If the situation continues, the potential loss will have farfetched consequences. Not only will their audiences be deprived of alternative sources of information right now, but in the medium-term post-war Syria will lack a media sector capable of playing its watchdog role as well as its role in peace-building.

Given the fact that the future of the sector is at stake, Syrian alternative media organisations and institutions should find ways to act and express themselves as a sector more coherently and in jointly advocating their needs, so that hopefully this effort leads to the wider recognition of the sector's importance by donors. Donors' shift in priorities would undermine the transformative potential of the sector and its "democratic capital", and would waste the significant efforts invested so far by Syrians, international media development organisations and donors.

Internally, Syrian media organisations should continue to work on organisational streamlining; improve further their audience outreach (at home and among the huge proportion of the Syrian refugee population) while in exile. This *modus operandi* will most probably continue to present itself as the only solution for the time being, as the high risk and low level of security can be found in all given contexts — from government-controlled to rebel-held to Kurdish-controlled areas. All alternative media organisations in exile have as their ultimate goal the ability to operate fully in the country. All have a level of presence in the country through a network of reporters and watch closely in-country developments to assess the possibility of increasing their presence on the ground with at least a small office. The prevailing assessment is that conditions do not present an opportunity yet. A full transition to in-country opera-

tions would require minimum conditions to be in place, encompassing guarantees of being able to operate on the ground with a certain level of safety and a level of respect for freedom of expression. While those conditions constitute a reasonable minimum, overall developments on the ground are volatile to the extent to which any projected timeline would be unrealistic. Syrian alternative media organisations should not rush to make a decision to fully relocate to Syria before minimum conditions are in place. It is realistic that the timeframe be medium-term, not short-term, due to the nature of developments on the ground. A medium-term timeframe would allow the organisations in question to carefully assess opportunities and prepare for their return.

Syrian alternative media organisations are well positioned to turn the regional trend of "digital disruption" to their benefit. The region's media landscape is undergoing a paradigm shift driven by the region's developing infrastructure and consumer behaviour. Younger demographics region-wide, the increasing level of digitisation and the demand for Arabic-language content and specific formats are relevant for Syrian alternative media, regardless of whether they are digital-only or use multiple platforms. Constant technological upgrading should be seen as a key factor for the considered media to grow their audience and compete with other media sectors.

The donors should acknowledge the relevance of the Syrian independent media sector and its role in the formation of an alternative discourse in the Syrian public sphere. They should acknowledge the almost unique development of the type of media and institutions that, in a relatively short timeframe, have made significant progress from activism to professionalism; present the only alternative to state- and factions-influenced media; and have the potential (if they survive) to play the role of professional media in processes succeeding the armed conflict (i.e. during the post-con-

flict period). This requires donors to prioritise the survival and further professional and institutional development of the media in question, which mostly operate in exile. These media are led by their mission and because of their independent position have the potential to contribute to peace and reconciliation, accountability and transparency. The donors should formulate approaches to media development that are informed by and anchored in the longer-term vision, but act quickly to preempt the regression and potential loss of the existing media sector.

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Annex

Annex I

Methodology

a) General considerations integrated into the methodological approach

The Syrian war — one of unprecedented scope and complexity — is in its ninth year. The war has taken a heavy toll on civilians and displaced a huge portion of Syria’s population. It has also triggered profound change in the Syrian media landscape. The highly controlled vertical structure of the pre-war landscape has been deeply shaken. Through 2011 and 2012, new actors and groups emerged, producing media content to contest the regime’s narrative. A sort of bottom-up “media revolution” gave birth to hundreds of informational initiatives with alternative narratives. It was soon succeeded by efforts to create media outlets. In many aspects, these efforts are directly linked to the Syrian civic and peace movement and its demands for democracy, including freedom of expression.

In the years after 2011, the nascent independent media sector began to gradually move on from its predominant feature — activism — and towards consideration of media as its primary professional engagement. Unlike regime-controlled, opposition or extremist media, whose common feature was the promotion of an ideology, a distinct group of media outlets and media organisations opted for independence and professionalism. As they developed, the “contours of a proper media sector has emerged, comprising consolidated, reliable and professional independent media outlets of increasing ethical standard and journalistic capabilities and legitimate media organisations, despite the enormous chal-

lenges they have faced throughout”, as IMS notes in its Call for Proposals. The development of the Syrian independent media sector has many different paths. Some media organisations were set up in exile early on, while maintaining broad networks of correspondents and reporters in Syria; others were operating fully in the country with various levels of territorial outreach.

The short but rich recent history of Syrian independent media organisations has already seen a discussion about which organisations should be given priority — a question usually posed by international donors and less so by the sector itself. The dichotomy of “exile” vs. “country based” has been somewhat superficial from the outset, as it suggests conflicting approaches. In reality, the situation on the ground has increasingly forced media organisations into exile — to neighbouring countries, with the biggest concentration in Turkey, and more recently to Europe, due to the changing environment in Turkey and other neighbouring countries. What is often overlooked in discussions fuelling the either/or approach is that going into exile has never been a choice of convenience; it was always a question of necessity that drove decisions to move all or part of the organisation abroad. In addition, it is very important to reconsider the term “exile media” in the context of new communication technologies, and to take a closer look at what exactly defines media as “exile media”.

One might ask why the central topic of this study is independent Syrian media organisations in exile. As IMS has noted, these organisations “are increasingly trying to comprehend a future in exile, raising profound strategic and existential challenges to the future objective, relevance and role of Syrian independent media in long-term exile with closing spaces inside the country, and in turn, its operational implications.” Acknowledging that no part of the independent media sector should be judged by its location, there are legitimate reasons for taking into consideration the prolonged exile *modus operandi* of Syrian independent media organisations.

According to the Reporters Without Borders index of global press freedom, Syria ranks third to last. It is also deemed “not free” by Freedom House’s Freedom of the Press index. Syrian journalists are persecuted by both state and non-state actors. The regime’s brutality in trying to silence independent voices is just one source of extreme insecurity and threat to the safety of those trying to practise independent journalism in Syria. The recent killing of Raed Fares and Hamoud Jnaid from Radio Fresh is a painful reminder of the level of hostility that all sides involved in the war pose to independent media and journalists. According to Reporters Without Borders’ 2017 report, 211 journalists and citizen journalists have been killed in the course of Syria’s civil war and “Syria has for years been the world’s deadliest country for journalists and citizen journal-

ists, who are caught between the Assad regime and its allies, Islamic State and many other radical Jihadi groups, and the Kurdish forces.”²¹

The end of the war in Syria is not yet clearly on the horizon. Nevertheless, what kind of peace and post-war arrangements will be reached matters even more for Syrian independent media organisations. Guarantees of freedom of expression and that independent media can operate freely in the country have so far not been part of any talks. Some of the countries involved in the war and attempting to take more prominent roles as “brokers of peace” are known for their own dismal records *vis-à-vis* freedom of expression and media freedom.

There is no evidence that this negative trend will be reversed in the short- to medium-term, as its major drivers stem from the re-consolidation of authoritarianism that varies in intensity from one country to another. Finally, global trends are negative, too. The human rights agenda in international relations — dominant in the 1990s — has fallen in priority since the 2000s. Taking the MENA region into consideration, stability, counter-terrorism and migration have once again been at the forefront of bilateral relationships — an approach that perpetuates pre-revolution strategies that were seen as stabilising the position of the region’s authoritarian strongholds rather than challenging them. These are the elements of the broader context that must be taken into account in strategic considerations related to Syrian media organisations in exile.

It is commonplace that independent media rely on a complex system that includes professional journalism, sound management of media enterprises, stable sources of funding, the proper means to gather and distribute news, modern equipment, media laws supportive of free speech, and the ability of journalists to work in a safe environment. With their country’s infrastructure having been severely destroyed, no forecast of how soon and with what funding it will be reconstructed, no evidence that peace talks include any discussion of media

laws supportive of free speech or guarantees that journalists can work in a safe environment, independent Syrian media organisations face extreme challenges in assessing their future and are at critical junction of their development.

Their role in informing both Syrian and international audiences about developments in Syria is critical. Moreover, they should be viewed as having “democratic capital” without which any post-war process in Syria, no matter how remote in the future it seems, cannot take place.

The case of independent Syrian media organisations proves that developmental and professional progress is possible even in extreme situations. However, the donor community (with very few exceptions) falls short in recognition of the role of independent media outlets and organisations. Such a strategic approach would include adequate financial commitments, and co-ordinated and sustained efforts to support the independent media sector with a medium- to long-term vision. Notwithstanding the benefits of training and technical and institutional support received by various international media assistance organisations so far, the overall lack of long-term approaches on the donor side has translated into a number of interventions with a short time-frame and, moreover, to prioritising strategic communications over media development. Changes in donor priorities have already been felt among independent Syrian media organisations. Developmental progress could be short-lived if pure survival becomes uncertain.

b) Approach

b1) Contextualising Syrian exile media organisations and institutions in the broader framework

We considered it important to create a broader framework for analysis for at least two reasons: a) to systematise the existing body of knowledge on the

level of approaches and recommendations that it produced, and b) to contextualise the case of Syrian exile media within this sector of media development globally. We specifically tried to identify whether there was a consistency in approach to exile media and to what extent the lessons learned from the past were integrated into more current approaches.

We also considered it important to analyse past and current cases of exile media to present the factors driving media into exile and their development strategies, role and transition to in-country *modus operandi* where relevant. This also included the experience of exile media in setting themselves up outside the country, in terms of internal organisation, news-gathering, management, content dissemination and audience surveys (where they existed), etc. We intended to present the methodology used by those media and their donors in defining the role as well as the impact of the exile media.

Analysis of past cases of exile media (Zimbabwe, Burma) and current cases (Belarus, Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran) was intended to present several different contexts and models such as: hybrid cases of “co-existence” of exile media alongside independent media operating in the country, as well as “pure” cases where exile media are the only source of independent content. Along the same lines, we highlighted cases of exile media making the transition to in-country operations by looking at the internal and external preconditions and the role those media played in their countries’ media landscape in exile and post-exile life. It was highly relevant to highlight cases of exile media that existed for a while but eventually closed after several or more years and to analyse the reasons for their closure.

While recognising the unique nature of the Syrian media landscape, we aimed to look at examples that were trans-border, less related to the context of the relevant countries and regions, and more related to the exile status, chosen strategies and use of new technologies.

b2) Analysing the historical background, the advent of Syrian independent media, and their current issues and future scenarios

The central section of the report analyses the state of Syrian exile media organisations and institutions today and in the recent past. The first part is dedicated to a brief historical analysis of the media landscape in Syria before the uprising, the emergence of media activism after 2011, and the emergence of alternative media during the war. This derived from a belief that a real attempt to provide a more complete history of Syrian alternative media was lacking. Moreover, we are convinced that it was necessary in order to better grasp different aspects of the current situation, and to better assess the value of the phenomenon.

The evolution of media organisations and institutions was divided into three phases: “the beginning” (2011—2012)”, “the boom” (2013—2015), and “the troublesome years” (2016—2018). For each phase, we tried to highlight the main elements in terms of active outlets, geographical focus, institutionalisation processes, funding sources, outreach and audience, media typologies, professionalisation, and journalistic production. Throughout the analysis, our aim was to clarify the processes that brought most of the considered outlets into a state of exile, and their different approaches to it.

The second part is dedicated to a critical analysis of the current situation. We decided to contextualise this part with an introduction to the terminologies used to define media organisations and institutions like those at the core of this study, considering that this terminology inevitably shapes how the field is perceived and approached.

We then analysed the main issues that currently characterise the field: media formats and typologies, geographic distribution, audience, editorial identity, funding context and strategies, the legal context, institutionalisation and professionalisation processes, and collaborations.

In order to have as precise a picture as possible, we relied on a combination of extensive literature analysis and in-depth interviews with Syrian journalists, media development workers, and donors’ representatives. A particular effort was made to highlight the challenges the actors currently face, as well as their strategies to overcome them, and their achievements.

In the final paragraph, we outlined possible future developments in the field, in terms of both obstacles and opportunities.

c) Research methods

c1) Desk study

We collected, systematised and studied available academic and semi-academic research, publications and other relevant documents on exile media to extract lessons learned in this field of media development (see Annex II a). This entailed:

- relevant literature on media development in conflict, post-conflict and fragile states to identify common and divergent points in various approaches
- relevant literature on exile media
- existing literature on donors’ approaches to exile media
- existing literature on Syrian media organisations and institutions

c2) Interviews with different groups of stakeholders

We considered the following groups of stakeholders relevant to our research: donors, media development and freedom of expression organisations, the community of practice and, most importantly, the Syrian media organisations and institutions. Between January and February 2019, we conducted a number of interviews (see Annex II b) in an open interview format with guiding questions (see Annex II c).

A second round of interviews took place in the following months, mainly via Skype, in order to confirm or complete some of the information previously collected.

d) Field visits

Field visits took place to cities with the greatest concentration of Syrian exiled media actors: Istanbul, Gaziantep, Berlin and Paris. The visits enabled the team to interview a variety of stakeholders in newsrooms, as well as have in-depth interviews with individuals who work without a fixed office space. Two researchers were present at most meetings in order to corroborate the stories; where needed, recordings were made to ensure proper attribution.

Editorial work was finalized December 2019

Note

¹ RSF, “In Syria, 211 journalists killed in conflict that began six years ago”.

Annex II b): List of interviews

Donors:

Joel Campagna

Regional Manager, Open Society Foundations (OSF),
18 January 2019

Meg Gaydosik

Former Senior Media Development Advisor, USAID Bureau for
Europe and Eurasia, 15 January 2019

Ivar Evensmo

Senior Adviser, Department for Economic Development, Gender
and Governance, Section for Human Rights, Governance and
Fragility, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad),
16 January 2019

Elisabeth Salvesen

Senior Adviser, Section for Human Rights and Democracy,
Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 18 January 2019

Media Development and Freedom of Expression Organisations:

Jesper Højberg

Executive Director, International Media Support, 7 February 2019

Michael de Villiers

Director, IREX Europe, 16 January 2019

Martin Landi

Senior Technical Advisor, IREX US, 17 January 2019

Serena Hamilton

Chief of the Party, IREX Istanbul, 5 February 2019

Leon Willems

Director of Policy and Programmes, Free Press Unlimited, 10 February 2019

Jens-Uwe Rahe

Head of Middle East/North Africa, DW Akademie, 26 February 2019

Johan Romare

former Director, FOJO, 31 January 2019

James Deane

Director of Policy and Learning, BBC Media Action, 8 February 2019

David Hivet

Director for Mediterranean Region and Asia, Canal France International, 5 February 2019

Martial Tourneur

Head of Assistance Desk, Reporters Without Borders, 12 February 2019

Mira Milosevic

Executive Director, Global Forum for Media Development, 5 February 2019

Elisabetta Plebani

Syria Program Coordinator, Free Press Unlimited, 25 February 2019

Henrik Grunet

former Programme Manager, International Media Support, 21 February 2019

Community of Practice:

Jane McElhone

former Senior Manager, OSF, 29 January 2019

Marie Struthers

former Senior Manager, OSF, 29 January 2019

Wilf Mbanga

founder of *The Zimbabwean*, 15 January 2019

John Masuku

founder of the Voice of the People, 18 January 2019

Syrian Media Organisations and Institutions:

Koumay al-Mulhem

Editor-in-Chief, MICT, 13 February 2019

Jawad Shorbaji

Editor-in-Chief, *Enab Baladi*, 24 January 2019

Akram al-Ahmad

Head of the Board Committee, ECSM, 23 January 2019

Khalil Agha

member of the Board Committee, ECSM, 23 January 2019

Deiaa Duchmoch

Managing Director, ANA Press, 23 January 2019

Hussein Berro

Board Director, SNP, 19 February 2019

Ibrahim Hussein

Managing Director, SJA, 22 January 2019

Youssef Wahbe

General Project Manager, SCM, 5 February 2019

Mohammed Haddad

Manager of Journalist's House, SCM, 23 January 2019

Rula Asad

Executive Director, SFJN, 31 January 2019

Roberta Pasini

Executive Director, SyriaUntold, 16 January 2019

Mohamed Dibo

Editor-in-Chief, SyriaUntold, 16 January 2019

Yassin Swehat

Editor-in-Chief, *Al-Jumhuriya*, 17 January 2019

Karam Nachar

Executive Director, *Al-Jumhuriya*, 25 January 2019

Absi Smeisem

Managing Director, *Sada al-Sham*, 25 January 2019

Jawad Abou Almuna

Managing Director, *Souriatna*, 25 January 2019

Malek Haddad

Editor-in-Chief, SMART News Agency, 12 February 2019

Lina Chawaf

Director (Paris), Radio Rozana, 22 January 2019

Munir Alayoubi and

Tammam Alboumayed

project managers (Gaziantep), Radio Rozana, 23 January 2019

Annex II c)

Guiding questions for donors, media development organisations and the community of practice:

Based on your insight and professional experience, were donor policies and the practice of media development in conflict and closed societies changing? If so, how?

What were the premises for such policies?

What were the broader frameworks under which media development/ assistance in conflict-affected and closed societies were typically hosted (human rights angle, good governance, etc.)?

How was the role of the media defined in such contexts?

Were exile media integral to those approaches?

In practice, what justification was employed for the exile media to become a part of the assistance programmes?

How were they supported?

What are the key lessons learned from such programmes?

According to your observations, what has been happening lately with donor community policies/approach to exiled media and media in conflict/post-conflict areas? What, in your opinion, could and should change in that approach?

Should the term “exile media” prompt a definition change in the digital age?

What has been/is your organisation’s approach to Syria/Syrian media?

Guiding questions for Syrian organisations and institutions:

Was the organisation first set up in exile?

Was the organisation first set up in Syria?

What reasons drove the organisation's decision to leave Syria?

What reasons drove the organisation's decision to move from one country of exile to another?

Is the organisation planning to move to Syria and, if so, what is the organisation's perceived period of operation from exile?

What pre-conditions have to be in place for the organisation to consider moving to Syria?

Legal set up:

Where is the organisation legally registered?

What were the reasons for that legal set-up?

What is the advantage of that legal set-up?

What is the disadvantage of that legal set-up?

How is the legal status of staff residing in the country of exile resolved?

Organisation

How is the organisation internally organised?

How many people reside at your HQ, and in what organisational capacity?

Does the organisation have an associated network of contributors in Syria?

What are the main organisational issues related to having staff in multiple locations?

Does the organisation have a strategy and, if so, for what period?

Content

What are the main features of the organisation's editorial profile?

Does the organisation have an internal code of ethics?

How does the organisation ensure the output of professional content?

What is the organisation's perceived niche compared to other Syrian media?

Does the organisation collaborate with other Syrian media on content production (and/or foreign media)?

Audience and impact

Does the organisation target a specific audience?

How does the organisation track and measure its audience?

How does the organisation engage with its audience?

What does the organisation consider to be its impact?

Training

What type of training does the organisation need, and in which areas?

What type of training has the organisation received?

Who were the main training providers?

What type of training has the organisation received that it considers beneficial?

Which training programmes were less successful?

Finance

What is the organisation's main source of funding?

Who are the main donors?

Where are the perceived changes in donors' readiness to provide support?

Are the donors' approaches affecting the organisation's situation and, if so, in what ways?

Are there any other sources of income?

Are there potentially other sources of income?

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