

Global Communications

EDITED BY CAROLA RICHTER AND CLAUDIA KOZMAN

Arab Media Systems





<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2021 Carola Richter and Claudia Kozman. Copyright of individual chapters is maintained by the chapters' authors.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text and to make commercial use of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Carola Richter and Claudia Kozman (eds), *Arab Media Systems*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0238>

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0238#copyright>

Further details about CC BY licenses are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Updated digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0238#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.



This project received support from the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) that has been funded under the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) grant 01DL20003.

This publication was financed in part by the open access fund for monographs and edited volumes of the Freie Universität Berlin.

ISBN Paperback: 9781800640597

ISBN Hardback: 9781800640603

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800640610

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800640627

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781800640634

ISBN XML: 9781800640641

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0238

Cover design by Anna Gatti based on a photo by Duangphorn Wiriya on Unsplash at <https://unsplash.com/photos/KiMpFTuuAk>

2. Syria: A Fragmented Media System

Yazan Badran

The nine-year-long conflict in Syria has had a ruinous impact on the country's social fabric, economic life, and territorial integrity. The territorial fragmentation, in particular, has led to the dissolution of the tightly controlled information environment which existed before the conflict. While the regions that remained under the control of the central government reflect, more or less, a continuation of the authoritarian logics of the Syrian regime from pre-2011, the regions controlled by Kurdish forces and opposition-linked rebel forces developed radically different, albeit unstable, media environments. Additionally, the substantial Syrian refugee population in neighboring countries and beyond has given impetus to the development of exilic and diasporic media outlets. These fundamental changes, and contradictions, in the Syrian media landscape will need to be reconciled and negotiated in any future settlement of the conflict.

Background

As the Ottoman provinces in the east were redrawn following World War I, the modern state of Syria emerged as the largest entity of the former Bilad Al-Sham, or Greater Syria. In the interwar period, Syria was placed under French occupation in accordance with a League of Nations mandate. Since gaining independence from France in 1946, Syria has been at the heart of the strategic competition among the surrounding regional hegemonies (Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel), as well as between the

USSR and the US during the Cold War. Being at the forefront of the Arab-Israeli conflict also meant that investment in the military took priority immediately after independence, and that the military establishment had an outsized role in Syria's national politics. The politics of Syria were also very much intertwined with and shaped by the ideology of Arab nationalism. Indeed, Damascus was the seat of the earliest Arab nationalist government (1918–1920), and Syria's different post-independence regimes have been oriented towards Arab nationalism in one way or another. The strength of the Arab nationalist ideology notwithstanding, Syria has been, since its modern borders emerged, a multiethnic and multireligious state. The tension between the dominant ideology among the ruling elite and ethno-religious heterogeneity of Syrian society, especially as Arab nationalism hardened its ethnolinguistic borders under the Ba'ath Party regime, is most visible in the state's troubled relationship with the sizable Kurdish minority in northeastern Syria. The almost two million Syrian Kurds, many of whom were stripped of their Syrian citizenship following a controversial census in 1962 (Albarazi, 2013), have been the subject of sustained state discrimination against their culture and, in particular, the Kurdish language for decades (Hassanpour, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Chyet, 1996). When the northeastern regions of the country proclaimed autonomy following the Syrian conflict, reclaiming the Kurdish language and culture was placed at the heart of that political project (Badran & De Angelis, 2016).

Several other factors have had a significant impact on Syria's politics and society throughout its modern history. These factors include the urban-rural and class divisions and sectarian and religious differences—all of which are often overlapping and intermeshed. Syrian politics have long been dominated by the landowning urban elites of the large cities—Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs—a class that was almost entirely made up of Sunni Muslims and, to a much lesser extent, Christians. This dominance began to unravel as rural regions became more developed. Moreover, while the army was long shunned by the urban Sunni elites, it was seen by the peasantry, as well as the religious minorities such as Alawites,¹ as an opportunity for social mobility and economic

1 Alawites, a minority sect of Shi'a Islam, represent about 12% of Syria's population, while Sunni Islam is practiced by an estimated 75%. As a syncretic sect, Alawites are considered a distinct branch of mainstream Twelver Shi'a Islam practiced in Iran.

advancement. As the role of the army in the country's politics expanded, so did the fortunes of these groups. The Ba'ath Party's *coup d'état* in 1963 finally ended the dominance of the urban bourgeoisie and brought about a new ruling class from the cohorts of the army. Specifically, the regime of Hafez Al-Assad (1970–2000), with its reliance on clan and family members, mostly of Alawite origin, in key positions in the state and the army, established a new structure of elite power in Syria “which draws strength simultaneously, but in decreasing intensity, from a tribe, a sect-class, and an ecologic-cultural division of the people” (Batatu, 1981, p. 331).

The popular uprising of 2011, and the subsequent protracted military conflict, brought into sharp relief all of these overlapping factors. It also reignited the regional and international competition over the future and orientation of the Syrian polity. The more direct and immediate consequence of the war was the devastating impact it had on Syrian society and economy. Syria's pre-war population, which was estimated at 21 million by 2011, has been decimated. By February 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that more than half have been displaced—with over 5.6 million fleeing to neighboring countries, such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and beyond, and a further 6.1 million having been internally displaced. Additionally, large swathes of the country's urban infrastructure have been destroyed by shelling, aerial bombardment, and clashes, and estimates for the cost of post-war reconstruction range from USD 350–400 billion. Finally, the Syrian exodus following 2011, coupled with the territorial and political disintegration and polarization, fractured the former unitary media system in the country and led to a fragmentation in audiences, media, and regulatory regimes.

Historical Developments

The earliest attempts to establish a popular press in what is now Syria had to contend with the highly restrictive laws of the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, since the earliest recorded paper *Al-Shahba*, published by Hashem El-Attar and Abdul Rahman Al-Kawakibi in Aleppo in 1877, the 91 different publications that emerged under the Ottomans were subject to “suspension, confiscation, or seizure” according to Dajani and

Najjar (2003, p. 303). This highly restricted environment ended with the demise of the Ottoman Empire following its defeat in World War I. The new political horizon of Arab nationalism, in ascendance since before the war, was reflected in the popular press in the tumultuous period of self-governance from 1918 until 1920 when France took over as the colonial hegemon in Syria and Lebanon. During the period of the French Mandate, press regulation came under the direct authority of the office of the French High Commissioner of the Levant. The period also witnessed the emergence of strong journalistic figures who commanded a nationwide audience. For instance, Najib Al-Rayyes, the so-called dean of Syrian journalism, was a nationalist writer and newspaper publisher, and his paper, *Al-Qabas*, enjoyed wide readership because of its support of Syrian independence. Other important publications included the nationalist daily *Al-Ayyam*, published by Najib Al-Armanazi, and the satirical weekly *Al-Mudhik Al-Mubki*, published by Habib Kahaleh (Rafai, 1969). Moreover, the antecedent to Syrian radio was established in 1941 by the French authorities with 15 employees and used short- and medium-wave transmission. In 1945, the radio stopped broadcasting after its Syrian staff resigned in protest of French policies in the country. It returned to the air on Independence Day, 17 April 1946, and became a full-fledged state broadcaster (Dajani & Najjar, 2003, p. 305).

The period immediately following independence was marked by political instability with power changing hands between civilian and military regimes. The 1948 Arab-Israeli war resulted in the arrival of over 80,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria (Said, 2003). The war also saw a series of military setbacks for the newly formed Syrian Army for which the officers held the politicians responsible. The social and political tensions in the aftermath of the conflict heralded a succession of military coups (1949–1954), which resulted in several highly restrictive press laws. From 1954–1958, parliamentary democracy was restored and, with it, the more liberal Press Law of 1949. These so-called democratic years ushered in a golden age of journalism in the country. Public and private dailies, weeklies, and specialized periodicals proliferated with a minimal censorship regime and a politically competitive environment (Martin, 2015; Rugh, 2004).

The major breaking point in the history of Syrian media came with the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party *coup d'état* on 8 March 1963. One of the

first steps taken by the new revolutionary leadership on that day was to ban all but three (Ba'ath-affiliated) newspapers, *Al-Ba'ath*, *Al-Wahda*, and *Barada*. Legislative decree No. 48 in 1963 took further steps by centralizing all legal publishing in one state-owned organization, the Al-Wahda Foundation for Printing and Publishing (Dajani & Najjar, 2003). In 1965, the Journalism Syndicate was brought under the government's authority. By the end of that year, only two national and three regional dailies, and a handful of local periodicals, were left, all of which were published by the state or Ba'ath Party organs. The 1963 coup ushered in an era of "mobilization press" where the media's main function was the promotion of the regime's interests and the mobilization of public support (Rugh, 2004). The Ba'ath Party instilled a socialist planned economy that promoted nationalization and state ownership and control of most of its sectors. It established a *de facto* state monopoly of all media organs, including the press, publishing and distribution, radio, television, and audiovisual production sectors that remained largely undisturbed until the late 1990s. Furthermore, from 1962 onward, following a failed coup attempt by Nasserists, Syria was placed under the provisions of emergency law (partially modified in the mid-2000s and officially lifted in 2011), which gave broad discretion to the executive authority and allowed it to bypass the constitution. The regime of Hafez Al-Assad invested heavily in state media and towards perpetuating a strong cult of personality revolving around Assad and his immediate family (Wedeen, 1999).

The tenets of the Ba'ath Party's dominance of the economy were severely challenged by the economic crisis of the late 1980s, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of the US as the global hegemon. These developments pushed the regime to take some tentative steps towards economic liberalization (*infatih*) culminating in Law No. 10 of 1991, which opened some sectors of the economy to private investment. In the media sector, this was only realized in the field of audiovisual production where private investment, starting in 1988, initiated a significant development of the television drama (*musalsalat*) industry (Blecher, 2002).

The death of Hafez Al-Assad in 2000 and the succession of his son Bashar Al-Assad brought a reinvigoration of economic liberalization processes. The process of authoritarian upgrading under the regime of

Bashar Al-Assad included a considerable opening of Syria's economy to world markets, privatization of state assets, gradual withdrawal of state subsidies, shrinking of the public sector, and the growth of a new class of businessmen loyal to the regime. Steps were also taken towards limited easing of restrictions on freedom of expression, but very little in respect to structural political reform (Hinnebusch, 2012). In 2001, the government adopted a new publications law that, while still very restrictive, opened the door for private ownership of print media. *Al-Domari*, a satirical newspaper, was one of the first to be established under the new law in February 2001. However, persistent government censorship and economic pressures led to its closure in 2003. Many of the licenses for private media went to Al-Assad crony businessmen, such as Rami Makhlouf, Mayzar Nizam Al-Din, and Majd Suleiman. The Internet also emerged as an important medium during the early 2000s. Syrian news websites, many of which were also owned by crony businessmen, were notable for providing a more open space for the discussion of Syrian politics than what was available in traditional media (De Angelis, 2011; Brownlee, 2020).

Political System and Legal Framework

The political and territorial fragmentation brought about by the Syrian conflict since 2011 is reflected in the fragmented Syrian media environment. This fragmentation has led to the development of parallel political economies within the country, in which radically different media exist. In particular, we can discern three separate media environments. The first comprises regions that have remained under the control of the central government (in particular, the coastal regions of Latakia and Tartus, the cities of Homs and Hama, and the capital Damascus) reflect, more or less, a continuation of the authoritarian logics of the Syrian regime from pre-2011 with only limited attempts at upgrading and reforming the system.

A second separate media environment emerged in the regions that came under the control of rebel groups characterized by the proliferation of completely new small- and medium-sized media initiatives, most of which were later to follow the Syrian exodus to neighboring countries (Turkey and Lebanon) or further afield to Europe where they have been

operating as *exilic* media. In northeastern Syria, Kurdish forces, led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), established a *de facto* autonomous region—Rojava—with its own largely independent institutional and regulatory frameworks and media, which comprises the third media environment.

Starting in 2011, the Syrian regime initiated several legal and constitutional reforms in an attempt to placate the protest movement. These reforms included abolishing Article 8 of the constitution which granted the Ba'ath Party a guaranteed leadership role in the Syrian government, as well as abolishing presidential plebiscites in favor of elections with multiple candidates. These legal and constitutional changes, however, did not fundamentally alter the *de facto* political system in the country, nor address the existing power bases of the regime in the state security agencies. The presidential election of 2014, dismissed as a sham, resulted in the reelection of Bashar Al-Assad to a new term of seven years with a plurality of 88.7% of the vote in a contest against two largely unknown candidates.

As for the media, the most important legislative change came with Decree No. 108 of 2011, which replaced preceding legislation as the regulatory framework governing the media sector. The law introduced several liberalizing provisions, including articles banning monopolies in the media sector and facilitating and regulating private investment in news agencies and broadcast, print, and Internet-based media (Article 35). It also included provisions protecting freedom of speech and the right to access public information (Article 3), as well as eliminating prior censorship of content "if the media does not fail its responsibilities" (Article 6). Under the law, the Ministry of Information is responsible for evaluating applications, issuing and revoking licenses to private media organizations, monitoring the operations of media outlets, and issuing accreditation and press credentials to non-Syrian journalists who wish to operate in the country (Article 22). The law, however, keeps in place the broad restrictions on content that "harms national unity," "incites sectarian or confessional strife," and "harms state symbols," and all unauthorized content on the armed forces (Article 12). Notwithstanding their more liberal leanings, these provisions are rarely applied in practice, especially articles relating to freedom of expression, access to information, and protection of journalists. Access to

information is still subject to the whims of regime officials and to broad restrictions on the basis of national security. Control and intimidation of journalists persists through an arbitrary and broad interpretation of Article 12 and the extant penal code, which criminalizes defamation of the president, the courts, and the military, as well as through extralegal means.² In addition, while the state of emergency, in place since 1962, was officially rescinded with Legislative Decree No. 161 of 2011, many of the provisions allowing arbitrary detention were reincorporated in the Counterterrorism Laws of 2012. For example, provisions of this new law were used to prosecute journalists, lawyers, and human rights defenders, such as Mazen Darwish and Hussein Ghreer who were charged with “publicizing terrorist acts” and “promoting terrorist activities.”

Institutionally, the domestic broadcasting sector remains dominated by the state broadcaster: The Organization of Syrian Arab Radio and Television (ORTAS) that is an entirely state-owned entity and accountable directly to the Council of Ministers. The television section of the entity is responsible for three terrestrial and five satellite channels. The satellite offerings include channels dedicated to news, entertainment, and television dramas, as well as a newly launched religious channel aimed at promoting the regime’s narrative within Syrian conservative circles. The radio broadcasts are carried on seven dedicated channels, including broadcasts over FM, AM, online, and satellite radio.

As previously noted, the collapse of the regime’s territorial control during the Syrian conflict has also provided spaces for new actors to emerge within the media environment. The northeastern regions of Syria, with substantive Kurdish populations, fell from direct regime control in 2012. The area—encompassing parts of the governorates of Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Aleppo, and the whole of Hasakah—has remained relatively stable and been spared the mass destruction seen in other areas that fell from government control. Media activity within the region is regulated by the Information Law of 2015 which was passed by the autonomous administration’s government. The law contains provisions to guarantee freedom of expression and the right to establish media organizations. The law also has a general provision guaranteeing access to public information with exceptions for national security and

2 See for example this report from Reporters Without Borders: <https://rsf.org/en/news/harassment-pro-government-journalists-growing-syria>

international relations. The law additionally established the Higher Council for Media, which is tasked with regulating the media sector in Rojava. The Council's 15 members are elected by the media professionals, outlets, and professional syndicates active in Rojava. It has the right to grant and revoke licenses to operate in the region for local and foreign media, as well as freelance journalists.

The media scene in Rojava is largely dominated by the autonomous administration-owned state media organ *Ronahi*. The organization runs the main satellite television station that broadcasts from the region, as well as the main semi-daily print newspaper of the same name. It broadcasts mostly in Kurdish, with special programming in Arabic and English. *Ronahi's* coverage leans heavily in favor of the PYD as the most dominant political force in Rojava. At the same time, most other political parties publish their own political newspapers, albeit with limited distribution. This includes parties affiliated with the Kurdish National Council, the main anti-PYD coalition in the region. Furthermore, a significant number of media outlets exist that are not officially linked to political parties. These media are mostly small community radio stations, print magazines, and news websites linked to civil society organizations and are dependent on media development aid and the limited advertising market for survival. The exception is *Arta FM*, which started as a community radio based in Amouda with support from European and US media development organizations and has become the largest independent media active in Rojava. This station broadcasts over the whole region and runs a sister station in Raqqa aimed at the mostly Arab population (Badran & De Angelis, 2016).

Another notable development was the opposition-affiliated media activists and collectives that sprang up early on in the protest movement in an attempt to circumvent the regime's control over the media sphere. Their work during the early years of the conflict was instrumental in providing a different narrative of the events to that of the regime's official version, especially because foreign journalists were not allowed access to the country (Halasa, Omareen & Mahfoud, 2014). As the conflict grew more protracted, and more areas fell out of regime control, the early media activism efforts began to coalesce into new media outlets, providing a different narrative to that of the regime-affiliated media. This development was further empowered

by the influx of foreign media development funding and support channeled to these actors from Western and regional governments and agencies (Della Ratta, 2018). In 2014, there were more than 93 Syrian media outlets operating inside opposition-controlled areas, not counting the official media of oppositional military and political groups. This new sphere of media was unified only by its staunch anti-regime orientation and was otherwise extremely heterogeneous in terms of ideology (from Islamist to staunchly secular leftist) and covered a variety of media, including broadcast and online radio stations, print and online news journals, magazines, and web-based news agencies (Badran & Smets, 2018).

As the conflict conditions inside Syria worsened, a process of consolidation and relocation commenced. Most of these media outlets had to move their core editorial and administrative operations to neighboring countries (in particular Turkey), while retaining a network of reporters inside the country. Since 2016, the structural conditions within which these media outlets must operate have become increasingly more difficult, in particular with regard to the Turkish policies towards Syrians in the country and the shifting priorities in donors' funding. Thus, only the most consolidated of these initiatives remain today. An example of these new media initiatives is *Enab Baladi*, which started in 2011 as a small pamphlet in the town of Darayya, south of Damascus, and has become a major news website and print weekly. Within this sphere of oppositional media, we can also include *Syria TV*, which was established in 2018 in Istanbul and is managed and run by Syrian media professionals who defected from regime control. The television station is part of the Qatar-based *Fadaat Media Group*, which manages other Syrian and regional media outlets such as *Zaman Al-Wasl* and *The New Arab*. Another important broadcaster is *Orient News TV* which is based in Dubai and owned by Syrian businessman Ghassan Aboud. There have also been several attempts to develop sector-wide institutions within this media sphere in an attempt to create a credible alternative to the regime-controlled media ecosystem. For example, the Syrian Journalists Association, based in Paris, was established as an independent professional journalists' union with the aim of offering an alternative body to the regime-controlled Syrian Journalists Union. It is

now a recognized associate member of the International Federation of Journalists.

Economy and Ownership Patterns

In the areas controlled by the central government, licensing for private media (broadcast and print) remains at the discretion of the Prime Minister's office. This largely means that private media ownership is the domain of businessmen loyal to the regime. The largest media owner in the country by far was, until fairly recently, Rami Makhlouf, the maternal cousin of President Bashar Al-Assad, and one of the wealthiest men in Syria. Makhlouf's spectacular and highly-publicized fallout with Al-Assad in mid-2020 leaves a question mark around how his media and telecommunications interests (which, alongside the rest of his wealth, are currently under state custody) will be distributed. Makhlouf, along with Mohammad Hamsho, a businessman close to Assad's brother Maher Al-Assad, controls the only private news television station, *Sama TV* (formerly *Addounia TV*). Makhlouf also owns outright *Ninar FM*, an entertainment and music radio station, and *Sham FM*, a news radio station in addition to the largest private daily newspaper, *Al-Watan*, and its financial sister weekly, *Al-Iqtissadiya*. Samer Foz, another business tycoon with close links to the Syrian regime, owns the entertainment television station *Lana TV*, and one of the largest media production houses, Sama Al-Fan (SAPI). The United Group (UG), a media publishing and advertising company, which previously published the only other private political daily, *Baladna*, along with an assortment of other entertainment and specialist magazines, is owned by Majd Suleiman, the son of Bahjat Suleiman, a former director in the state security apparatus and current ambassador to Jordan. Other private media outlets, mostly entertainment-focused radio stations, are also controlled by the regime-crony businessmen nexus.

The Syrian economy has been severely damaged by the ongoing war, declining by more than 70% since 2011. This, along with European and US sanctions on the Syrian regime and individuals and businesses linked to it—both Makhlouf and Foz are on the US Treasury Department's sanctions list—has led to an exodus of Syrian capital to neighboring

countries. The UG media conglomerate, for example, moved most of its regional operations, which include the weekly classified paper *Al-Waseet* and the Lebanese daily *Al-Balad*, to the Dubai-based AWI Company. This was also the case for Syrian television drama production, a substantial sector before the war, which moved much of its productions to other countries, such as the UAE, Egypt, and Lebanon. For instance, Foz's SAPI production company, one of the largest television drama producers, moved its operations to Dubai.

The flight of Syrian capital has led to stagnation in media production within the country. Additionally, the collapse in the living standards of ordinary Syrians, both within and outside the country, has meant that the advertisement market for media outlets is extremely limited. Syrian media, in all three different spheres, are dependent on outside funding for their operations. In the case of regime-oriented media, this funding is usually funneled through well-connected, wealthy owners. In the case of oppositional and Kurdish media, such as *Enab Baladi* and *Arta FM*, this funding sometimes comes from European and US development aid which is usually more transparent and is managed by specialized intermediary media development organizations. Less transparent, however, is the direct funding from foreign governments to media outlets such as *Syria TV* (with funds from Qatar) or new radio stations in former ISIS territories (with funds from France and the US). This lack of sustainable business models for Syrian media outlets means they are heavily dependent on their wealthy backers, or the priorities and policies of donor bodies and governments. This makes for an extremely precarious condition for the organizations and the media workers and limits their scope for professionalization or institutionalization.

On the other hand, the emergence of relatively more independent new spaces within the oppositional media sphere created novel opportunities and avenues for a new generation of Syrian journalists, artists, and media makers to establish themselves. These new actors were able to benefit from generous funding for professional and technical skill building, especially in the early years of the Syrian conflict, as well as from the global interest in the Syrian conflict. This is most evident in fields such as independent film production. For example, a number of new Syrian filmmakers have emerged who have accrued critical acclaim

for their work. Indeed, several Syrian-directed documentary films have been nominated for Academy Awards in recent years.³ Furthermore, several independent production houses and film collectives, such as Bidayyat and Abounaddara, have been established since 2011 (Wessels, 2019).

Technology and Infrastructure

The ongoing military conflict has also had a devastating effect on the country's telecommunications infrastructure, especially in the opposition-controlled regions where most of the military operations have taken place. Even in government-controlled regions, the infrastructure has deteriorated through years of underinvestment, and the frequent electricity shortages mean that access to communication services has been greatly curtailed. The Syrian Telecommunication Establishment (STE) remains the sole regulatory agency tasked with the supervision of the telecommunications infrastructure in the country. The STE also authorizes private Internet service providers (ISPs) to deliver their services inside Syria, but in practice, its authority only extends to government-controlled areas. More than 20 different ISPs operate within the government-controlled regions of the country. According to the International Telecommunication Union (based on STE estimates), Internet penetration stood at 34% with 7.8 fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in 2018, while mobile cellular subscriptions stood at 98 per 100 inhabitants. The mobile cellular network is operated by two companies, *Syriatel*, owned by Rami Makhoulf, and *MTN Syria*, a subsidiary of the South African multinational MTN Group Ltd. Outside of what was under regime control, however, the extant telecommunications infrastructure was largely destroyed and has been replaced with *ad hoc* solutions. Internet connections in this area are dependent on either satellite Internet receivers or, as in the border regions, cable links with neighboring countries—Turkey in the Idlib and Aleppo region and Iraqi Kurdistan in the Kurdish regions.

3 *Last Men in Aleppo* (2017, directed by Feras Fayyad), *Of Fathers and Sons* (2018, directed by Talal Derki), *The Cave* (2019, directed by Feras Fayyad), and *For Sama* (2019, directed by Waad Al-Kateab and Edward Watts).

Despite the aforementioned conditions, it is the Internet-based media that have seen the most fundamental changes. The regime's early steps in 2011 to lift the blocking of *Facebook* and other social media websites allowed it to cultivate a strong partisan, loyalist constituency that can challenge the opposition's more established online presence. Indeed, social media platforms, in particular *Facebook*, have become a major site of contestation in the ongoing conflict. *Facebook* penetration in Syria climbed from 1% in 2010 to 37% in 2017 (Salem, 2017). Since 2011, there has been an explosion of local community media pages—largely based on *Facebook*—that cater to the loyalist communities in regions that have remained under government control. This development mirrors a similar phenomenon seen in opposition communities, especially during the early years of the Syrian conflict. These media are often concerned with local development in the city or region and are staunchly pro-government, particularly with regard to the Syrian Army and the military conflict with armed opposition groups. Nevertheless, they also contain some modicum of criticism of government policies, in particular with regard to widespread lawlessness, corruption, and the deterioration of services (Issa, 2016). As the military conflict winds down, there are signs the regime is attempting to bring this section of the media in line and to restrict its relative independence. In 2019 alone, there were several cases of detention by state security agencies of high-profile loyalist journalists who had covered the conflict on the side of the Syrian regime (e.g., Raif Salamah was arrested and held for more than a month in May 2019; Wissam Al-Tayr, a journalist from the Damascus Now network, was arrested in December 2018 and released only nine months later in August 2019). In terms of the legal framework within which these media have to operate, the Cybercrime Law of 2012, which regulates information access online, has important implications for their operation. The law provides a legal framework for online censorship, content, and user monitoring by ISPs who are required to retain records of Internet traffic. Moreover, website owners and providers are instructed to divulge their names and contact information under the provisions of this law.⁴

4 For more details see the Internet Legislation Atlas: <https://Internetlegislationatlas.org/data/summaries/syria.pdf>

Challenges

The territorial and political fragmentation brought about by the war since 2011 has meant that Syrian audiences are now divided across at least three different media spheres. Each of these spheres has developed its own logics, discourses, and *modus operandi*. There is very little interaction among these different spheres. Only rarely do media outlets acknowledge or reference media content from the other segments, and this usually comes with accusations of fabrication and bias. Thus, polarization among these different spheres is extremely high as they engage in a three-sided “war of narratives.” In a sense, this accurately reflects the highly polarized political environment, as well as the deep societal divisions that have existed since 2011. Such polarization, however, is often manifested in the proliferation of hate speech in much of the media content coming from Syria.⁵ Moreover, this polarization is certainly reinforced by the fact that journalists from loyalist media cannot operate openly in opposition-held regions, and vice versa. Conditions for the work of journalists, especially international journalists, are much more favorable in the Kurdish-controlled regions, but certain restrictions still apply with regard to criticism of the PYD and in covering the conflict with ISIS.

The resurgence of the Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad and its emergence as the victor in the military conflict also means that the fundamental rules governing Syria’s media system—at least in the regions claimed by the regime—will remain unchanged in the foreseeable future. The regime’s control over the media sector leaves very little space for dissenting voices within the state-controlled media. Since 2011, oligarchs and crony businessmen have further entrenched their control over wide sectors of the economy and especially the privately-owned media sector. The media conglomerate of Rami Makhlouf includes interests in all sectors of the media business, including press, television, and radio, as well as media production businesses and telecommunication. Furthermore, there has been increasing evidence of the regime reasserting closer control over loyalist social media groups and Internet websites that have had, until recently, broader margins in their reporting.

5 See for example this report from the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression: <https://scm.bz/en/en-studies/hate-speech-and-incitement-to-violence-in-syrian-media-research-study>

Outlook

The future of Syria's media system will be deeply linked to how the later stages of the Syrian conflict evolve. It will be one of the fundamental elements of negotiations for any future compromise settlement over the shape of Syria's post-war polity. The latest steps of the Syrian regime to bring even loyal media that are mildly critical under control can be seen as an effort to reassert its legal position as sovereign over the whole of the Syrian state and to create a legal framework for any future reintegration of other regions that will be favorable for its continuity. Nevertheless, in practice, the Syrian regime does not have enough power to assert this sovereignty over large swathes of the country that are either under direct military control by regional and international actors or their local proxies. Furthermore, the emergence of oppositional, exilic, and Kurdish media in areas outside of regime control have ushered in fundamental changes in terms of the informational environment that Syrians now have access to. These new realities will be extremely difficult to simply reverse, and any future settlement will have to consider ways to reintegrate them. Finally, the sheer number of Syrian refugees who have fled the country, around 25% of Syria's pre-war population, suggests that exilic and diasporic media will come to play an increasingly significant role in the future. Independent media makers who have developed their skills and know-how in Turkey, Lebanon, and Europe over the past years, as well as larger media producers who have moved their productions to Dubai and Egypt, can be expected to perpetuate this trend.

References

- Albarazi, Z. (2013). *The stateless Syrians* (Research Paper No. 011/2013). Tilburg: Tilburg Law School. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2269700>
- Badran, Y., & De Angelis, E. (2016). 'Independent' Kurdish media in Syria: Conflicting identities in the transition. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 9(3), 334–51. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18739865-00903001>
- Badran, Y., & Smets, K. (2018). Heterogeneity in alternative media spheres: Oppositional media and the framing of sectarianism in the Syrian conflict. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 4229–47.

- Batatu, H. (1981). Some observations on the social roots of Syria's ruling, military group and the causes for its dominance. *Middle East Journal*, 35(3), 331–44.
- Blecher, R. (2002). When television is mandatory: Syrian television drama in the 1990s. In N. Méouchy (Ed.), *France, Syrie et Liban 1918–1946: Les ambiguïtés et les dynamiques de la relation mandataire* [France, Syria and Lebanon 1918–1946: Ambiguities and dynamics of a mandatory relationship] (pp. 169–79). Damas: Presses de l'Ifpo, Institut français d'études arabes de Damas. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ifpo.3177>
- Brownlee, B. J. (2020). *New Media and Revolution: Resistance and Dissent in Pre-ripping Syria*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Dajani, N. H., & Najjar, O. A. (2003). Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, Status of media in. In D. H. Johnston (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of International Media and Communications* (pp. 301–15). Cambridge: Academic Press.
- De Angelis, E. (2011). Syrian news websites: A negotiated identity. *Oriente Moderno*, 91(1), 105–24. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22138617-09101010>
- Della Ratta, D. (2018). *Shooting a revolution: Visual media and warfare in Syria*. London: Pluto Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv7vct7t>
- Halasa, M., Omareen, Z., & Mahfoud, N. (Eds.). (2014). *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline*. London: Saqi Books.
- Hassanpour, A., Skutnabb-Kangas, T., & Chyet, M. (1996). The non-education of Kurds: A Kurdish perspective. *International Review of Education*, 42(4), 367–79. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00601097>
- Hinnebusch, R. (2012). Syria: From 'authoritarian upgrading' to revolution? *International Affairs*, 88(1), 95–113.
- Issa, A. (2016). *Syria's new media landscape: Independent media born out of war* (MEI Policy Paper No. 2016–9). Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute. https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PP9_Issa_Syrianmedia_web_0.pdf
- Martin, K. W. (2015). *Syria's democratic years: Citizens, experts, and media in the 1950s*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Rafai, S. A. (1969). *Tārīkh al-ṣaḥāfah al-Sūrīyah* [History of Syrian journalism]. Cairo: Dar Al-Ma'arif.
- Rugh, W. A. (2004). *Arab mass media: Newspapers, radio, and television in Arab politics*. Westport: Praeger.
- Said, W. E. (2003). Palestinian refugees: Host countries, legal status and the right of return. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 21(2), 89–95. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.21293>
- Salamandra, C., & Stenberg, L. (Eds.). (2015). *Syria from Reform to Revolt: Vol. 2, Culture, Society, and Religion*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

- Salem, F. (2017). *The Arab social media report 2017: Social media and the Internet of Things: Towards data-driven policymaking in the Arab World*. Dubai: MBR School of Government <https://www.mbrsg.ae/getattachment/1383b88a-6eb9-476a-bae4-61903688099b/Arab-Social-Media-Report-2017>
- Wedeen, L. (1999). *Ambiguities of domination: Politics, rhetoric, and symbols in contemporary Syria*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226345536.001.0001>
- Wessels, J. (2019). *Documenting Syria: Film-making, video activism and revolution*. London: I.B. Tauris.