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# **JOURNALISM IN SYRIA**

## **IMPOSSIBLE JOB ?**

**NOVEMBER 2013**

**REPORTERS  
WITHOUT BORDERS**  
FOR FREEDOM OF INFORMATION



# INTRODUCTION

## A GRIM LOTTERY

Veteran war reporters describe covering Syria as a lottery or Russian roulette. *"A few months ago,"* one said, *"you were already taking a risk to go to Syria but now you need a lot of luck to get out alive or not be taken prisoner."* War reporting has always involved risks but reporters and their assistants are not supposed to be targeted by the belligerents. They are not supposed to be the prey of snipers, soldiers firing mortars or hostage-takers.

The terrain is so fluid and the protagonists so entangled that even the most experienced reporters, those who know where to go without taking excessive risks, lose their bearings in Syria. It is harder than in other wars to know who controls what neighbourhood, to decipher the alliances and, sometimes, just to know who is who. It is a country where the sinister art of political dissimulation and manipulation has been cultivated during decades of rule by the Assad clan.

Syria is now the world's most dangerous country for journalists. According to a Reporters Without Borders tally, more than 110 news providers (including 25 professional journalists) have been killed in connection with their work since March 2011 and more than 60 are currently detained (either held hostage by Islamist armed groups or held in Bashar Al-Assad's jails).

Citizen-journalists pay dearly for trying to be as independent as possible in their reporting. These non-professional information providers, whom Reporters Without Borders obviously distinguishes from the propagandists in both camps, fill the void often left by the professional journalists.

The difficulties and dangers encountered by news providers have evolved during the 32 months of the conflict. At first, it was the regular army and government thugs that retaliated against journalists for their coverage of the anti-Assad protests and the government's crackdown. But now Syrian and foreign journalists are persecuted not only by the regular army but also by armed opposition groups in the "liberated areas" in the north, and by the security forces of the PYD, the main political force in the regions with a mainly Kurdish population.

Kidnappings continue. *"Every war is dangerous and in Syria, journalists are exposed to the same risks as in comparable wars in the past,"* Le Monde reporter JeanPhilippe Rémy said. *"The difference is that abduction is now systematic in some parts of the country. It's open season on journalists."* President Assad was Syria's only representative on the Reporters Without Borders list of "Predators of press freedom" in 2011 but [Jabhat Al-Nosra](#) was added to the list in May 2013 and now other Jihadi groups deserve to be included such as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, abbreviated as ISIS (or sometimes ISIL).

News coverage is a key issue in Syria. According to reliable estimates, more than 110,000 people have been killed since the start of the conflict. The government uses the state media in a propaganda and disinformation war. At the same time, new media often turn into puppets of the "revolution" and end up trying to impose a new form of thought control.

Foreign journalists, who are often denied visas, rarely have access to both sides. But the presence of these neutral and independent observers on both sides of the front line is essential for deciphering a complex situation and explaining the realities of this war to the international community. ■

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# 1 THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS COUNTRY FOR JOURNALISTS

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## 1.1 - OPEN SEASON ON FOREIGN REPORTERS

### Since the start of the war:

- Seven foreign journalists have been killed,
- More than 30 journalists have been arrested by government forces,
- 37 journalists have been kidnapped or have disappeared.

### 1.1.1 - Hostages or missing

At the end of October 2013, at least 16 foreign journalists were either detained, held hostage or missing in Syria. Reporters Without Borders is aware of at least 37 cases of foreign journalists being abducted or going missing since 2011. The pace of kidnappings has increased in recent months and they have become more professional, creating an environment that discourages many journalists from going to Syria. As Patrick Cockburn said in *The Independent*: "Violence is one thing, but what causes real terror is the threat of kidnapping."

In September 2013, some Jihadi online forums were openly urging militants to "capture all the journalists," especially foreign ones suspected of being "spies in the pay of the west."

These threats are being taken seriously. On 21 October 2013, the US State Department issued an alert announcing that it had learned of a plot to kidnap western journalists visiting the centre and south of Syria. The abduction of foreign journalists began in July 2012. Two freelance photographers, Dutchman **Jeroens Oerlemans** and Briton **John Cantlie**, were held for several days by rebels before being released by the Free Syrian Army. The kidnappings became more frequent towards the end of 2012 and even more so in the spring of 2013. By then, foreign journalists were becoming the targets of abduction in the so-called "liberated" areas in the north of the country by criminal groups, armed opposition groups and above all by Jihadi groups such as ISIS.

Their victims have included **Matt Schreier**, an American freelance photographer held hostage from January to July 2013, **Jonathan Alpeyrie**, an

## FOREIGN JOURNALISTS HELD HOSTAGE

(at the end of October 2013)

- Four French nationals: **Edouard Elias** and **Didier François**, who were reporting for *Europe 1*. They were kidnapped on 6 June 2013.
- Two American nationals: **Austin Tice**, a freelancer for the *Washington Post*, *Al-Jazeera* in English and *McClatchy*, kidnapped on 13 August 2012.
- One Spanish national: **Marc Marginedas**, a reporter for the Barcelona-based daily *El Periódico*, kidnapped on 4 September 2012.
- One Jordanian national of Palestinian origin: **Bashar Al-Kadumi**, who was working for the US TV channel *Al-Hurra*. He was kidnapped on 20 August 2013.
- One Lebanese national: *Sky News Arabia* cameraman **Samir Kassab**, kidnapped on 15 October 2013.
- One Mauritanian national: *Sky News Arabia* reporter **Ishak Mokhtar**, kidnapped on 15 October 2013.

French-American reporter released on 20 July 2013 after being held for 83 days, and the Italian journalist **Dominico Quirico** and the Belgian teacher Pierre Piccinin, who were held from April to September 2013.

While some of these kidnappings have been purely criminal in nature (in other words, kidnappings just for the ransom), others have been politically motivated. In the case of ISIS, it is not clear why this group kidnaps journalists. Is it for ideological or religious reasons? To raise money? To rid the region of all unwanted observers, foreign and Syrian? The absence of any public statements by ISIS leaves the door open to every kind of supposition.

When journalists are taken hostage, their families are usually unsure what to do. Most families initially decide that their loved-one's abduction should not be made public but change their minds later if there is no sign of their being released or no dialogue with the kidnappers, or if accusations are made against the hostages that need to be publicly rebutted by providing evidence that they are journalists.

The abduction of journalists, especially foreign journalists, has become standard practice in today's so-called "modern" wars and Syria is unfortunately no exception. In Iraq, Reporters Without Borders registered 93 kidnappings of journalists from 2003 to 2010. The victims included British, Turkish, US, Czech, French and Japanese nationals. Hardly any nationality seems to have been spared. After Iraqi nationals, France had the biggest number of kidnapping victims although it was not a member of the US-led coalition: a total of nine French journalists were kidnapped.

All of the foreign journalists kidnapped in Iraq were eventually released, except Italian freelancer **Enzo Baldoni**, who was executed by his abductors in August 2004 ([read the report: "Iraq war: a heavy death toll for the media, March 2003 - August 2010"](#)). At least [16 foreign journalists have been kidnapped in Afghanistan](#) since January 2002.

### 1.1.2 - Foreign journalists arrested and mistreated

Foreign journalists and media are subject to various kinds of violence, threats and harassment in Syria, including brief arrest and detention for extended periods. The regime is responsible for about 60 per cent of these arrests.

On 10 March 2012, shortly after the information ministry issued a press release threatening to take measures against news organizations and journalists entering Syria illegally, two Turkish journalists – **Adem Özköse**, a reporter for the magazine *Gerçek Hayat* and the daily *Milat*, and cameraman **Hamit Coşkun** – were abducted

## PROFILE OF OLIVIER VOISIN

by *Paris Match* reporter **Alfred de Montesquiou**, winner of the 2012 Albert Londres Prize

It's a trench dug into the mud along the "road of death," the main highway from the cities of Homs and Hama to Idlib, in northern Syria. From their positions, the rebels fire on all vehicles trying to pass. From hills on the other side, Bashar Al-Assad's army responds to the rebel attacks with artillery barrages.

"It's like First World War trench warfare," says filmmaker Grégoire Deniau, who was there on 20 February 2013. The rebels gave him a bloodstained camera and a few personal effects. They belonged to war photographer Olivier Voisin, who had just been hit by shrapnel from a shell. He died four days later from cerebral bleeding. He would have been 39 on 1 March.

Korean by birth, Burgundian by adoption and stateless in spirit, Olivier had been trying for years to give a sense to his life by using his camera to cover war zones. It wasn't so much the thrill of danger that stimulated him. It was the ambition to get a visual record of the injustice of war – the suffering, the fear and the gratuitous blindness of guns. Deeply humanistic, he wanted to show the humanity of all those caught in the spiral of violence. And that breaking point at which everyone must choose whether to remain "human" or sink into barbarity.

Abandoned at a very young age in South Korea and brought up in a village in Burgundy, Olivier ended up finding his biological family in the United States in 2008. He was haunted by the issue of adoption, its morality and the suffering it can induce. Only one other subject fascinated him – Syria. It was as if by some mysterious detour, his search for photographic truth in war had connected with his quest for personal truth.

Olivier had already covered the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Libya, but it was in Syria that he showed what he was capable of. Almost everyone who went to cover this ravaged country would run into him near the front, his energetic figure and his friendly smile. He has gone to join the civil war's 60,000 other victims for good.

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by a pro-government militia near the northwestern city of Idlib and were handed over to a government intelligence agency. They were released two months later after mediation by the Islamic Republic of Iran. This year, German journalist **Armin Wertz** was arrested on 5 May in Aleppo and was released on 5 October.

**Klester Cavalcanti**, a 42-year-old Brazilian journalist working for the magazine *IstoÉ*, managed to get a Syrian press visa and planned to use it to do a report on Homs, a city ravaged by clashes between rebels and government forces in February 2012. He arrived in Damascus on 19 May 2012 and immediately took a bus to Homs. After reaching the bus terminal in Homs at around 3 p.m., he asked a taxi to take him to the city centre but government soldiers stopped the taxi almost at once. Although he showed them his press visa, they took him to a police station, where he was handcuffed and interrogated. Like the soldiers, the police wanted to know what he was doing in Homs.

*"I am here to do my job and my presence has been authorized by the Syrian government,"* Cavalcanti kept on saying. He asked if he could make a call but the police refused. A police officer gave him a blank sheet of paper and took a cigarette from his pocket. *"If you don't sign this sheet of paper, I will burn your eye,"* he said. Cavalcanti refused. The policeman lit the cigarette and stubbed it out on his face, beside his eye. Cavalcanti signed.

He was transferred to a prison the next day at dawn and was put in a cell with around 20 other inmates. One spoke a bit of English, which allowed him to communicate with them. Some had fought the Syrian army, others had committed ordinary crimes.

*"It wouldn't have been so bad"* compared with the police station, he said, except for the complete uncertainty about what was to happen to him. *"I knew nothing about anything."* He remained in the dark for six days. Finally, on 25 May, he was removed from his cell without explanation and was taken to Damascus. There he was released but he could not go anywhere because his visa had now expired. After getting a permit, he was taken to Lebanon in a Brazilian embassy car. Other journalists have not been so lucky.

### 1.1.3 - Foreign journalists killed in Syria

At least seven foreign journalists have died covering the war in Syria, four in 2012 and three in 2013. Whether they were the victims of targeted killings or collateral damage, all these deaths have gone unpunished.

**Gilles Jacquier**, a French reporter for *France 2*, was killed by a mortar shell while reporting in Homs on 11 January 2012. **Rémi Ochlik**, a French

photographer working for *IP3 Press*, and **Marie Colvin**, a US reporter for *The Sunday Times*, were killed in a heavy bombardment that was deliberately targeted, witnesses say, at the media centre in the Homs district of Baba Amr in February 2012.

*Japan Press* correspondent **Mika Yamamoto** was killed while she was covering clashes between rebels and the Syrian army in the eastern Aleppo district of Suleiman Al-Halabi in August 2012.

**Yves Debay**, a French journalist reporting for *Assaut*, a French magazine specializing in military matters, was fatally shot by a sniper in Aleppo on 17 January 2013. French photographer **Olivier Voisin** died in Antakya international hospital on 24 February 2013 from the shrapnel injuries to the head and arm from an exploding shell that he sustained while covering the operations of a rebel *katiba* (brigade) near the northern city of Idlib. **Hadi Baghbani**, an Iranian documentary filmmaker working for Iranian state radio and TV and for media linked to the Revolutionary Guards (including the *Tasnim news agency*), was killed near Damascus in August 2013 while "embedded" with the regular Syrian army.

Although foreign journalists are increasingly being targeted by the various parties to the conflict, Syrian news providers continue to take the brunt of the violence. As Jean-Philippe Rémy said: *"Both Syrians and foreigners are abduction targets. But the risk is much greater, infinitely greater, for Syrian journalists. The difference is that foreigners have a price while the Syrians don't have the same ability to pay."*

## 1.2 - SYRIAN NEWS PROVIDERS IN THE REGIME'S SIGHTS

### Since the start of the conflict:

- At least 102 Syrian news providers (17 professional journalists, 85 citizen-journalists and five assistants) have been killed
- More than 200 have been arrested by government forces
- At least 58 have been arrested or kidnapped by non-government forces (Free Syrian Army, PYD security forces in the Kurdish region, Jabhat Al-Nosra and ISIS)
- At least 50 are currently detained or kidnapped (by the different parties to the conflict) or are missing.

# MAZEN DARWISH AND THE SYRIAN CENTER FOR MEDIA

Fourteen people were arrested when the Damascus-based Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) was raided on 16 February 2012. Three of them are still held – its director, **Mazen Darwish**, and two of his assistants, **Hussein Gharir** and **Hani Zaitani**.

A hearing to decide whether they should be tried was originally due to have been held in May 2013 but it has been postponed four times, the latest until 18 November. **Mansour Al-Omari** and **Abdel Rahman**

**Hamada**, who were released on 6 February, could be tried with them. They are all currently facing up to 15 years in prison with hard labour on a charge of “publicising terrorist acts” under article 8 of an anti-terrorism law that President Assad promulgated in 2012.

If the hearing goes ahead on 18 November, the judge is meant to decide whether to maintain or dismiss the charges brought against them by Syrian air force intelligence in connection with their SCM activities.

The offending activities named in the indictment include monitoring information posted online by the Syrian opposition, publishing reports on human rights and the situation of the media in Syria, and documenting the number and names of those detained, missing, wanted, or killed since the start of the conflict.

According to the indictment, the investigating judge regarded all this as an attempt to “destabilize the internal situation, one that led international organizations to condemn Syria.” The indictment clearly constitutes a violation of freedom of information. Darwish was awarded the Reporters Without Borders press freedom prize in 2012.

## 1.2.1 - Targeted by the regime and its *shabbiha*

The lives of Syrian news providers began to be shed at a staggering rate in 2012, when 13 professional journalists, 47 citizen-journalists and five media assistants were killed in connection with their work. During the first eight months of 2013, five professional journalists and 27 citizen-journalists were killed. Nine news providers were killed in 2011.

Until June 2012, most of the persecution of Syrian news providers was the work of the regime and its *shabbiha*, who arrested not only pro-democracy protesters but also the citizen-journalists who went to cover their demonstrations. The authorities wanted to impose a news blackout on the protests and the force being used to disperse them. Beatings and the use of torture were and are systematic.

The cartoonist **Ali Ferzat** was one of the victims. Kidnapped by security officers in Omeyyades Square in the centre of Damascus on 25 August 2011, he was beaten and cigarettes were used to burn his skin. His torturers also broke his left hand, the one he uses to draw. They finally dumped beside the airport road, with a bag over his head, a few hours later.

Syrians and foreigners living in Syria are afraid to speak out because those who dare to talk or cooperate with foreign news media often pay a high price. **Omar Al-Assad**, a journalist who had worked with many media since the start of the conflict, including the *As-Safir* and *Al-Hayat* newspapers and *Al-Jazeera* TV, was arrested on 3 July 2011 and was held for five months. Other Syrians who overcame their fear of reprisals were also arrested. Some are still being held for helping foreign journalists and some are still being tortured for their contacts.

Use of targeted killings, the regime's preferred new method of repression, began to grow in the second half of 2012 (see chart). Arrests continued but on a lesser scale. Jihad As'ad Mohamed, a leading

Syrian journalist who was editor of the newspaper *Al-Qassbioun* until the start of the unrest in Syria, was arrested by the security forces in Damascus on 1 August 2013.

## 1.2.2 - Pro-government media and journalists targeted by opposition forces

Aside from the death of **Shoukri Ahmed Ratib Abu Bourghoul**, deputy director of censorship at the pro-government newspaper *Al-Thawra* and a *Radio Damascus* programme host, who was fatally shot in the head on 30 December 2011, the first attacks by armed opposition groups on government or pro-government media began at the end of June 2012.

The information war includes so much disinformation that it is impossible to know who is behind many murders and attacks. The lack of neutral, independent observers makes it very hard to distinguish truth from falsehood. Rumour reigns supreme. The volume of independently reported information is small compared with all the government propaganda and all the one-sided reporting by many Syrian new-generation media.

The official news agency **SANA**, for example, reported on 27 June 2012 that there had been an attack on the headquarters of the privately-owned, pro-government TV station *Al-Ikhbariya* in Drousha, 20 km south of Damascus. The authorities described the attack as “barbaric” and “terrorist” **SANA** broadcast footage of destruction. “*Terrorist groups stormed Al-Ikhbariya's headquarters, placed explosives in the studios and set them off,*” information minister Omran Al-Zo'bi announced live on state TV.

He also claimed that they “*took equipment*” and “*executed journalists and employees,*” without naming the victims, saying what positions they held or describing the exact circumstances of their deaths. And despite all the alleged death

## PROFILE OF OMAR AL-KHANI

### activist turned freelance photographer, kidnapped by ISIS

"I was kidnapped by Da'ish [ISIS] in the Sheikh Najjar industrial zone to the northeast of Aleppo on 4 August, a day after I had arrived there to install an Internet connection for an international NGO. I was in the NGO vehicle with three other people when a 4WD vehicle blocked our way. Six or seven masked men, who are armed to the teeth, got out and told us to get into their vehicle. When we reached our destination, they took all my personal effects, searched me, and handcuffed me with my hands behind my back. They began by interrogating the driver, who they released after five hours.

Then it was my turn. They asked me if I prayed, and what I was doing in Aleppo for this NGO. Among other things, they accused me of installing spying equipment and helping a kufar [infidel] organization. They also asked me many questions about my work as a photographer and my links with media, especially foreign media. And, as they had found music on my computer, they accused me of listening to hard rock. The ordeal lasted 33 days, during which I was tortured five times – beaten repeatedly with different kinds of electric cable and chains, given electric shocks to the tongue and suspended for ten minutes by the hands. Before releasing me, they made me sign a pledge never to work for the media again."

and destruction, the station continued to operate. It also proved impossible to establish the casualty toll from the bombing of state TV headquarters at the heart of the Damascus high-security district of Omeyyades on 6 August 2012 or the attack on the state TV building in Aleppo two days before that.

Around 20 pro-government journalists have been the victims of abduction or summary execution since March 2011. Government TV cameraman **Talal Janbakeli**, for example, was kidnapped in Damascus on 5 August 2012 by the rebel Free Syrian Army's *Haroun Al-Rasheed katiba*. Four employees of pro-government *Al-Ikhbariya* TV were kidnapped by an FSA *katiba* while covering clashes in a Damascus suburb five days later. A regular army operation freed three of them in Al-Tal. The fourth, assistant cameraman **Hatem Abu Yehiah**, died in unclear circumstances on 10 August. Ali Abbas, a journalist with the government news agency *SANA*, was murdered at his home in Jdaidet Artouz on 11 August 2012. *Al-Ikhbariya* journalist **Yara Abbas** was killed by sniper fire while she was covering a siege at Al-Qusseyr on 27 May 2013.

#### 1.2.3 - Jihadi groups target news providers

The emergence in late 2012 of Jihadi groups in Syria such as Jabhat Al-Nosra and, more recently, ISIS, has had a direct impact on Syrian news providers in the "liberated" areas. Most of the harassment and persecution of journalists in recent months has been the work of ISIS, which aims to impose its law in the areas it controls. The north-central city of Raqqah and surrounding region are particularly dangerous.

There has been no news of *ANA Radio* employee **Rami Al-Razzouk**, for example, since ISIS abducted him on 1 October 2013 in Raqqah and subsequently ransacked the station, seized its broadcasting equipment. Similarly, there has been no news of **Sami Jamal**, a reporter freelancing for *Radio Rozana*, since ISIS abducted him in Al-Atarib (east of Aleppo) on 14 August, or of **Aboud Haddad**,

a Syrian armed forces defector who became a photographer in December 2011 and who was abducted by ISIS in Idlib province on 26 June. An *Orient TV* crew consisting of reporter **Obeida Batal**, sound engineer Hosam Nizam Al-Dine and technician Aboud Al-Atik was kidnapped in Tel Rifaat (40 km north of Aleppo) on 25 July and has yet to be released.

According to Massoud Akko, a member of the Syrian Journalists Association, the dangers that news providers face in the Kurdish regions vary from one region to another. He distinguishes firstly the Hassaka region (also called *Al-Jazeera*), secondly the Raqqah region and the Halep Sharqi region (east of Aleppo) and thirdly the Afrin region.

In *Al-Jazeera*, the government forces and the Jihadi groups are everywhere, as well as the dominant Kurdish political force, the Democratic and Union Party (PYD), which tries to control the media through its Free Media Union (*Itihad Al-I'lam Al-Hur*). In the Raqqah and Halep Sharqi regions, the main danger is from ISIS. "*No one can work, not just the Kurds*," he says, pointing to the case of **Nour Mohamed Matar**, the brother of Amer Matar, who has been missing since 13 August 2013. Finally, in the Afrin region, it is the PYD's security forces, the Popular Protection Units (YPG), that say what goes.

A Tel Abiyad-based journalist described how the population, including news providers, are squeezed between the PYD, Jabhat Al-Nosra and ISIS. Referring to the *hay'at shar'iya*, the Sharia courts operated by Jabhat Al-Nosra, he said: "*The hay'at shar'iya accuse me of working for the PYD, while the PYD accuses me of collaborating with Jabhat Al-Nosra (...) You cannot report everything. The two sides refuse to let you write freely.*"

Massoud Hamid, the editor of the Arabic and Kurdish-language bimonthly *Nûdem*, told Reporters Without Borders about the difficulties he has in distributing his newspaper in certain parts of the north because of the presence of Jihadi groups on the roads, especially near the cities of Afrin, Kobane (Ayn Al-Arab) and Tel Abiyad.

"*I cannot even write all that I want in my newspaper*," he said. "*I am afraid for my staff, although our area is safer than others.*" He recognizes accepting a number of taboos, such as writing about the relationship between the PYD and the government in Damascus. He also recognizes that it could be dangerous to criticize Iraqi Kurdistan's political leaders such as Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, especially as his newspaper is printed in Dohuk, in Iraqi Kurdistan.

## 1.3 - PREDATORS OF PRESS FREEDOM

### 1.3.1 - Adding to the list of predators

In 2011, Bashar Al-Assad was Syria's only representative on [the list of "Predators of Press Freedom" that Reporters Without Borders](#) publishes every year on World Press Freedom Day. The list consists of presidents, politicians, religious leaders, militias and criminal organizations that censor, imprison, kidnap, torture and kill journalists and other news providers. Powerful, dangerous and violent, these predators consider themselves above the law.

Bashar Al-Assad took office in July 2000 after three decades of unrelenting authoritarian rule by his father, Hafez. The Syrian people and the international community initially thought Bashar would be a reformer and would bring democracy to Syria. Thirteen years later, he is seen in a very different light. Ever since the Syrian uprising began in the spring of 2011, he has obstinately rejected any possibility of reform and has not hesitated to use imprisonment, torture and summary execution to silence opposition voices. In his determination to hold on to power, he has been responsible for an unprecedented bloodbath and for persecuting news providers who serve as independent witnesses of his crackdown.

The Jihadi armed group Jabhat Al-Nosra joined Bashar Al-Assad on the list of predators in 2013 because of its persecution of both Syria and foreign news providers. Created in April 2011 with the declared aim of combatting and overthrowing the Assad regime, Jabhat Al-Nosra also advocates the creation of a caliphate and the imposition of the Sharia. It has grown in strength since the summer of 2012 following the "liberation" of areas in the east and north of Syria, an increase in violence and the feeling that opposition was marking time. Designated by the United States as a terrorist organization at the end of 2011, it declared its allegiance to Al-Qaeda in 2013.

It is highly likely that ISIS will be the next Jihadi group to join the list of "Predators of Press Freedom" in 2014. ISIS is an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which was created in 2004 (in response to the previous year's US-led invasion of Iraq), with the aim of establishing a caliphate in Iraq's mainly Sunni regions. AQI changed its name to Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) after the death of its leader, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, in 2006. ISI was boosted by developments in Syria in 2012 and, in April 2013, its leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, announced that Jabhat Al-Nosra was an ISI offshoot and that ISI and Jabhat Al-Nosra were merging to become Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS).

This was immediately denied by Jabhat Al-Nosra leader Abu Golani, backed by Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri, but Baghdadi kept going and his ISIS can claim significant military achievements including taking a government air base in Minakh (in the governorate of Aleppo) in August 2013. ISIS is now mainly present in the "liberated" areas in the north, including Raqqah, Idlib and Aleppo, and has been responsible for most of the mistreatment of civilians, including news providers, in these areas since the spring of 2013. Its preferred method is abduction.

*"These days, news providers in the 'liberated' areas are more scared of ISIS than of the government," Radio Rozana programme director Lina Chawaf said. "They act more like gangs and they are unpredictable. Nothing like a regular army."*

### 1.3.2 - Another source of danger

The YPG, the security forces of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the dominant political force in the Kurdish areas, also harass Syrian news providers, albeit to a lesser degree, either threatening them or arresting them.

Speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals against their families, many news providers told Reporters Without Borders they had been harassed by the PYD. But with one big difference – the PYD usually releases detainees after questioning them for several days, while people abducted by ISIS are rarely released quickly.

### 1.3.3 - Parallel judicial systems?

Some of these Jihadi groups use methods or organizations that are arbitrary in nature and thereby constitute a threat to fundamental freedoms and to the work and safety of journalists and citizen-journalists. This is the case with the legal committees (*hay'at shar'iya*) that they have set up to render justice in the areas they control.

After taking eastern Aleppo, the various rebel battalions or *liwa* created the Aleppo United Court in September 2012 as part of an attempt to create a new civilian administration and punish abuses by Free Syrian Army members. This court was meant to extend its authority over the rest of Aleppo province and to coordinate the creation of local courts in each town but a lack of resources opened the way for other initiatives, above all the creation of the *hay'at shar'iya* by Al-Tawheed, Ahrar Al-Sham, Suqqur Al-Sham and Jabhat Al-Nosra in November 2012.

The two court systems began competing with each other while the Aleppo city government and the *hay'at shar'iya* began competing for control of the city's management. Negotiations are currently under

way to merge the two Aleppo courts but the United Court has been losing influence because of a lack of funding while the *hay'at shar'iya* is refusing to cooperate with Aleppo's civilian institutions.

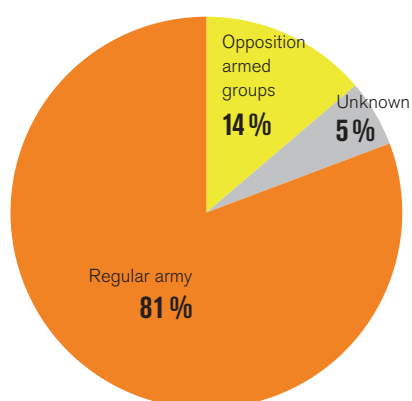
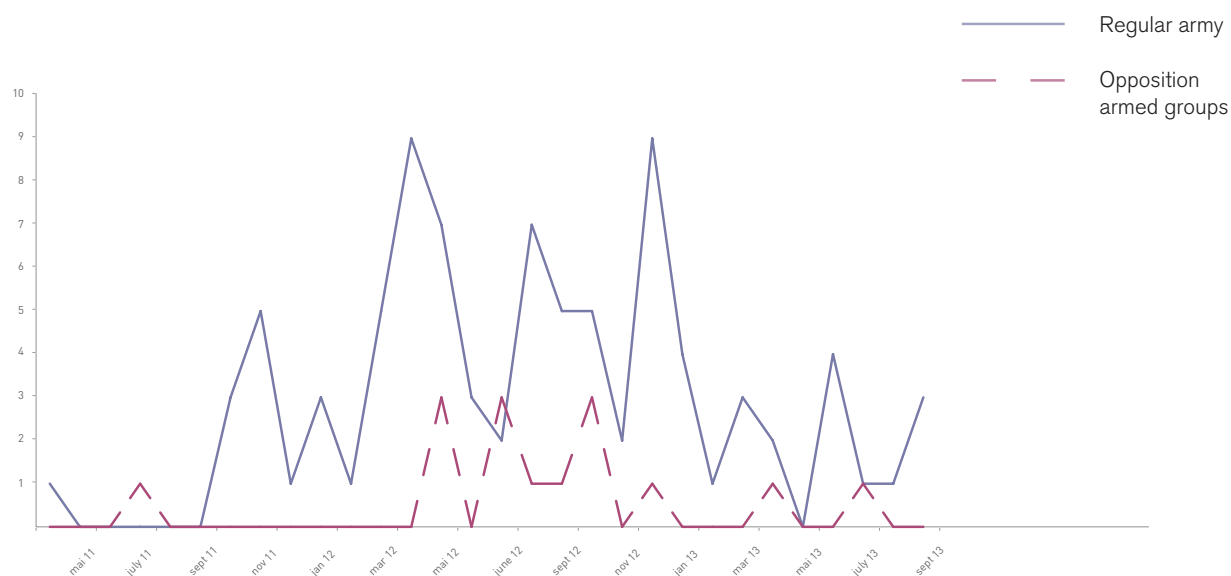
The Aleppo *hay'at shar'iya* tries to coordinate the activities of its counterparts in other liberated areas with the aim of standardizing practices and rulings, but some are resisting. At the same time, it has lost influence since Jabhat Al-Nusra's withdrawal in March 2013, while ISIS seems to be trying to control the *hay'at shar'iya* in the liberated areas it controls.

The various courts – the United Court, the *hay'at shar'iya* that cooperate with centralization initiatives, and the autonomous *hay'at shar'iya* – apply different laws, depending on the judge and the political tendency of the group controlling the territory. The courts base their decisions directly on religious texts or on the United Arab Code, which the Arab League wrote in Cairo in 1996 but never adopted.

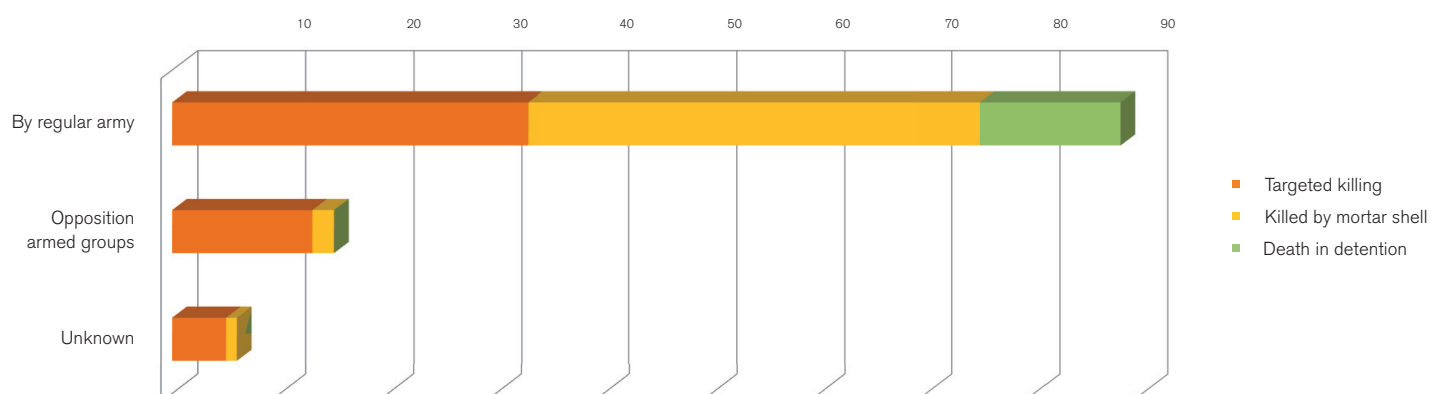
The opposition National Coalition, whose components are subject to divergent and contradictory influences, has not taken a political decision on the nature of the law to be applied in the “liberated” areas. The lack of a decision has allowed many countries, especially Gulf states, to fund judges' groups that aim to apply the United Arab Code. The absence of a single body of law and the lack of coordination between these committees results in arbitrary decisions on detainee rights and sentencing.

These parallel judicial systems are one of the methods the Jihadi groups have used to assert their authority over the “liberated” areas. They pose new problems for Syrian news providers and foreign journalists who continue to cover the war despite the mounting dangers. At first welcomed as vital observers, foreign journalists are now encountering mistrust and even vilification from the population and pro-opposition groups. But first they have to get into Syria. ■

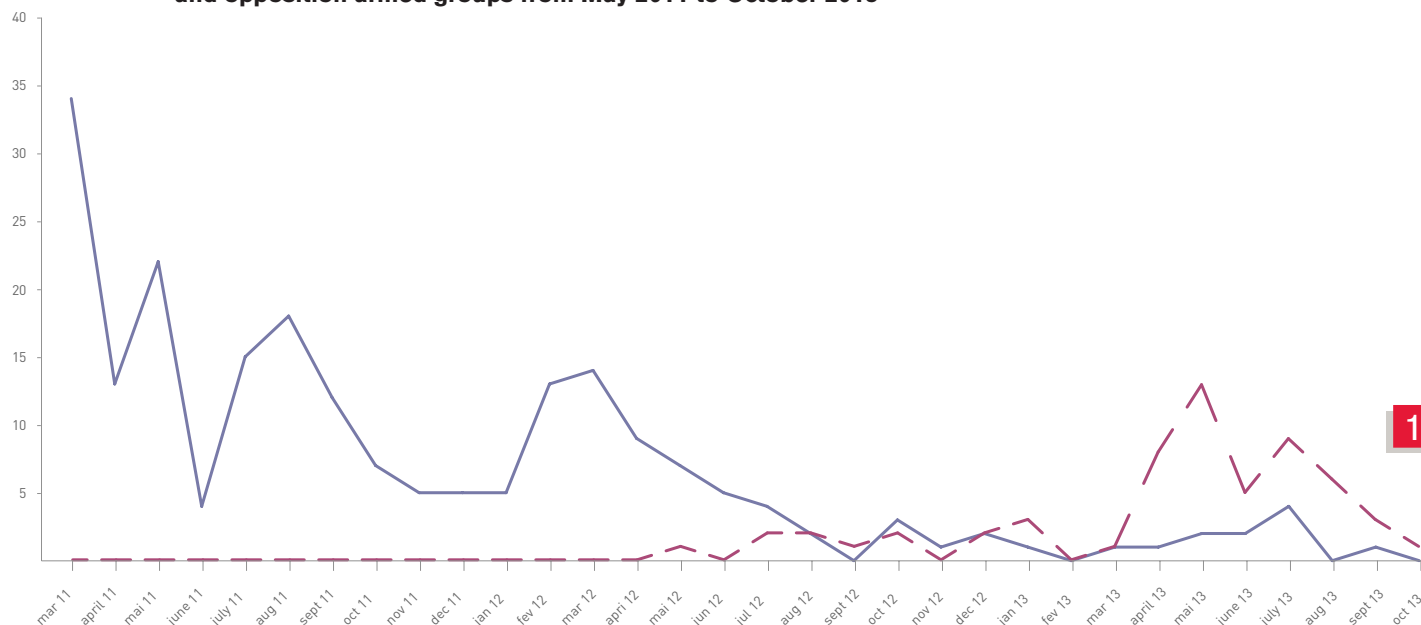
**Monthly total of news providers killed by the regular army and opposition armed groups from May 2011 to October 2013**



**Causes of death**

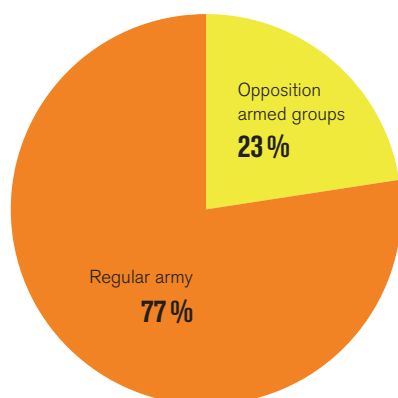


**Monthly total of news providers arrested by the regular army and opposition armed groups from May 2011 to October 2013**

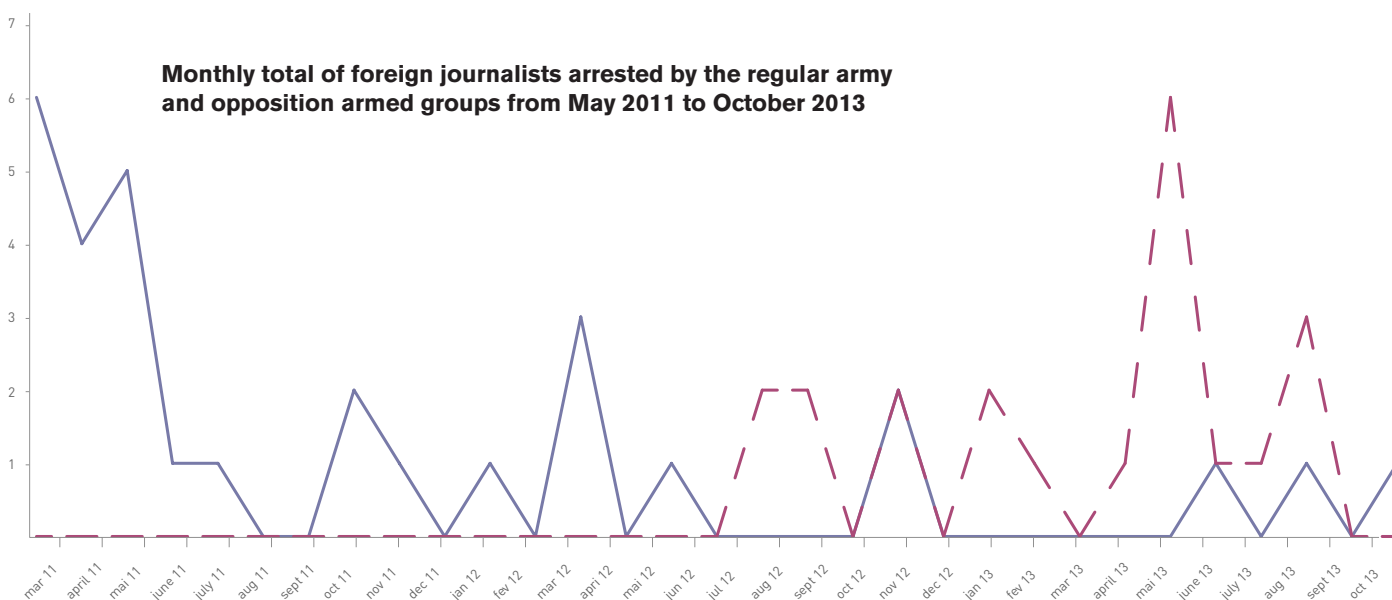


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**Percentage of news providers arrested by the regular army and opposition armed groups**



**Monthly total of foreign journalists arrested by the regular army and opposition armed groups from May 2011 to October 2013**



# 2 TOUGH STRUGGLE FOR FOREIGN JOURNALISTS

## 2.1 - GETTING HARDER AND HARDER

### 2.1.1 - "Being on the ground," "striking a balance" and avoiding disinformation

News organizations are adapting to the dangers on the ground. Most of the leading international news media nowadays rarely send staff reporters into Syria, except when they have the government's permission to go to Damascus, and instead rely on the growing number of freelancers operating inside the country. Coverage of Syria continues regardless. Few have followed the example of The *Sunday Times*, which has refused to take stories from freelancers since the death of its reporter, Marie Colvin, saying this encourages them to take additional risks. Despite all the hazards, many freelancers continue to go to Syria.

In an article on 12 September 2013, *USA Today* deputy foreign editor William Dermody wrote that, in the absence of visas, his newspaper relies on sources in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs, a network of freelancers in various nearby countries, Syrian exiles, and rebel troops near the borders. He continues to send reporters into Syria but only for very short periods.

*"The area is so dangerous to report in that journalists can only go in and out to one spot for one day, maybe two," Dermody said. "That's not much time to cover a war in a way that gives people an idea of what's going on. It's a quick hit, and the risk is high that the reporter may be captured, injured or killed."*

Sammy Ketz, the *Agence France-Presse* bureau chief in Beirut, told Reporters Without Borders in July 2013 that he continued to travel regularly with a photographer to Syria, where *AFP* has a bureau with two people. *"You can still write a lot of things, but you must know how to strike the right balance, and vary the menu."*

*Figaro* correspondent Georges Malbrunot said: *"A print media reporter with contacts can still work in Damascus even if the environment is not ideal. But the security services materialize as soon as a TV camera is seen. It's real hell for a TV crew trying to work there."*

Jean-Philippe Rémy cited the example of a colleague working for a TV station who was able to travel legally to Damascus and to work on a report, but refused to finish it because he felt that, given the circumstance in which he had been allowed to operate, his story would have been little more than a piece of pro-government propaganda.

*"Damascus is worth visiting if you can meet the very few independent sources still there, above all the UN mission, which is doing an amazing job because it is in touch with both sides," Malbrunot said. "You can move about Damascus without any problem if you are on your own. Things get more difficult when you leave the capital. When I went to Homs, I held to tell the mukhabarat [intelligence services]. So they followed me and I had to go and see the governor. Suddenly your work is more closely supervised. It was the same in Latakia but fortunately I saw the two or three personal contacts I have there and I was able to get a better feel for reality."*

Malbrunot added: *"For me, the hardest thing about Syria is finding reliable independent sources who don't always let emotion or wishful thinking get the better of them, although such a reaction is understandable after so much violence. I would have liked to have*



*visited the north, the rebel side, but I don't I would have been welcome after writing an article blaming a rebel blunder for Gilles Jacquier's death. And given all the hostage taking, I wouldn't want to live through such an experience again."*

Luc Mathieu of *Libération* pointed out that that the government rarely issues press visas to journalists who have reported from the rebel side. And in the absence of visas, many journalists are forced to enter Syria illegally.

*"Without a visa, we are banned from a large part of the country," Rémy said. "We are forced to cover the war from just one side. Does that turn us into fools, into spokesmen for the revolution? We decided to go to Damascus with Laurent Van Der Stock because we wanted to verify the rebel claim that the battle for Damascus had begun. We wanted to see what was really happening on the ground. Covering a war above all means being in the field (...) It's not everything but it is essential."*

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### 2.1.2 - Steadily worsening environment for journalists

After the start of the uprising and until the Turkish authorities opened the Öncüpınar/Bab Al-Salama crossing point near Kilis, journalists used to enter Syria from Turkey illegally, without a visa or permit, and reenter Turkey illegally after they had done their reporting.

*"You had to find people to escort you and you had to walk for kilometres with all your gear, dodging patrols and, above all, trying not to be noticed,"* Luc Mathieu said. *"The escorts, who were mostly smugglers, would collect me from my hotel in Turkey. Entering Syria was not the main problem. It was reentering Turkey that was complicated. In March 2012, I was caught near Reyhanli, in Turkey, opposite the Syrian town of Atma. They didn't believe I was a journalist. They thought I was a spy. I spent 20 hours in police custody in Antakya before being released."*

For a time, the Turkish authorities imposed heavy fines on journalists caught crossing the border illegally and some journalists were even banned from visiting Turkey again in the future.

The security situation worsened in northern Syria in the spring of 2013, making it harder for journalists to operate. The main danger was abduction. *"You can always be wounded or killed by a shell or a bomb but that's not the main danger,"* Mathieu said. *"In some northern areas such as Idlib or Hama, where the fighting is still intense, there's a double penalty – you can be killed by government forces or kidnapped by Jihadis. Nowadays it's a lottery. Elsewhere, you regard the journalist who is kidnapped as unlucky. There, it's the opposite. The person who isn't kidnapped is lucky."* Omar Ouamane called it "Russian roulette," adding: *"It makes you forget the war, the snipers and the artillery bombardments."*

*"We used to see Jihadis in the spring of 2012 but we would avoid them and they would avoid us,"* Mathieu said. *"We knew that we shouldn't photograph them or film them without warning them. But we could ask to meet them. That is no longer possible. We can no longer talk with them. It's as if they have been given orders. They distrust reporters, especially TV reporters."*

*"Last March, we were stopped between Hama and Idlib by six masked men who asked who I was,"* Ouamane said. *"The driver said I was a journalist and I had to show my French passport. One of the men asked if I had come for Jihad. I said no, I was a journalist. Was I a Muslim? I more or less managed to recite a verse from the Koran. After that, I was able to do an interview with them and ask about their motives. Nowadays, I am not sure if I could do that. The situation has become very precarious and unpredictable."*

Mathieu cancelled the trip he had planned for September 2013. *"I rarely cancel but I didn't feel it was right. We would have needed an armed escort with two pickup trucks and 10 armed men. We cannot work with media centre activists any more because they cannot protect us. But even an escort is not without risks. Firstly, you have to choose them well so that they are not the ones who kidnap you. Secondly, they have to be sufficiently well armed to get through an ISIS roadblock and protect you when you arrive. Finally, there's the question of how you work with an armed escort. How much freedom does a journalist have, working like that? Not to mention the cost. Just travelling between Kilis and Aleppo will cost 500 to 1,000 dollars."*



*"In Libya and Côte d'Ivoire, the front lines were relatively well identified but in Syria everything is confused," Ouamane said. "With all the different fronts, nothing is clear. You can't see any light at the end of the tunnel."*

Mathieu, who has spent a lot of time in Afghanistan, said: *"Even in the dangerous areas in Afghanistan, you can organize reporting, you can meet the Taliban and, of course, you can be 'embedded' with a foreign army. All this can be arranged. In Syria, you have no one to negotiate with, especially as the abductions are not necessarily for ransom. You cannot call ISIS to request a permit! No one knows what they want."*

### 2.1.3 - "Leave nothing to chance" – the crucial choice of a fixer

*"Things get more complicated, more dangerous and longer to organize all the time," Luc Mathieu said. "Moving about, finding interpreters and evaluating risks, all that takes much more time."* The time required to prepare a reporting trip has grown considerably.

The choice of fixer is crucial. They are hired for their knowledge of the region and their network of contacts, and often to interpret as well. *"The most important thing is having a good contact because, once inside the country, you rely totally on him,"* Spanish journalist Angel Sastre said. *"You cannot do anything without him once you are in Syria."*

*"Good fixers are rare and that can be a problem inasmuch as they are known to the brigades and armed groups and don't go unnoticed,"* Marine Olivesi said. *"So either you use a recommended, high-profile fixer with all the risks that entails. Or you use a less known one, but you don't always know who he is."*

Security arrangements are nowadays the most important part of the preparations for a reporting trip to Syria, Olivesi says. *"You start sorting it out weeks in advance. The*

*logistical issues often override everything else (...)* It was so different when I went to Greece to do a story on Syrian refugees trying to enter Europe. Everything was simple and spontaneous – the usual way of working."

Omar Ouamane agreed. *"I finalize all possible arrangements before entering Syria, either from Paris or from Turkey,"* he said. *"You leave nothing to chance, especially the fixer and the driver. You take care to verify their motivation and to make sure that they are not just doing it for the money."*

*"It was different in Libya,"* Olivesi added. *"You got into the car of a fixer you found right at the border, without any thought as to the possibility of being kidnapped. In Libya, the danger was on the front line."*

### 2.1.4: What kinds of journalist manage best?

Freelance Marine Olivesi points out the advantage of being a female journalist: *"Being a woman certainly helps. Dressing in Syrian clothes makes it easier to blend in, since no-one looks at you. A male journalist can't pass unnoticed in the same way, at checkpoints, for example, since he is the one who is spoken to and asked for identification."* The Franco-Syrian journalist Hala Kodmani adds: *"A woman can approach the women of a house, which would not be possible for a man."*

Kodmani also believes that her age is an advantage. *"I am no young thing and I noticed from the start that this brings respect and affection."*

*"In November last year, the nephew of a family I was staying with in Binnish took me to the Internet café on his motorcycle. I was wearing a hijab. It was ok because it was as if I was his aunt. I could not have done it if I was 25 years old."*

*"And since I am Syrian, people forget I am a journalist and they speak more freely. I remember a lively family discussion last November about the appearance in the Binnish area of the Jabhat Al-Nosra front, which one of their nephews had just joined. I can also use public transport and observe everyday life without being spotted."*

*"It was the same when I went to Raqqah in September. When I crossed the border at Jarablus, I was wearing jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, and I put on a hijab just before I reached the border. With my Syrian passport and my two huge suitcases stuffed with bottles of shampoo and other things the family I was saying with had asked me to bring, I was taken for a Syrian visiting her relatives."*

*"The activist who was waiting for me on the other side of the border even kissed me on the cheeks as if I was his aunt, too. Once I reached Raqqah, the only thing that concerned me was to*







*pass unnoticed, without attracting attention, and especially not to be spotted as a foreign journalist, which would put my host family in danger. Close family members know who I am but others were told I was a friend from Damascus. The mother of the family usually took the initiative to introduce me, allowing me to adapt my behaviour accordingly. Once I made a mistake and took out my camera near the Euphrates when I was with her and some members of Jabhat Al-Nosra came to see what we were doing. But when they saw two 50-year-old women who didn't look like journalists, they left almost apologetically!"*

### 2.1.5: Suspicion of foreign journalists increases

The perception of foreign journalists on the ground has changed. *"Some people believe they have been lied to,"* said Olivesi. *"At first, journalists told them it was important for them to be there to help bring change. But nothing has changed ... Suspicion is especially noticeable in Aleppo, where there was a heavy presence of journalists for several months."*

Luc Mathieu said: *"By May this year, or even before that, it had become more difficult to shoot photos or film in hospitals and air raid sites."*

*"In Libya, journalists were regarded as allies of the people,"* said Olivesi. *"As a Frenchwoman, I was welcomed with open arms and shouts of 'Sarkozy!!!"* *That made things quite easy. Because of the lack of change and the inaction of the international community in Syria, there is incomprehension, mistrust and even aggression towards journalists. It hasn't happened to me personally, but in every interview there are questions about the failure of our governments to take action. When I was in Deir Ezzor in May, I didn't encounter this type of weariness since hardly any foreign journalists had been there."*

## 2.2: DESIRE FOR CONTROL

### 2.2.1: Government uses visas and accreditation as weapons of control

Visas and accreditation are difficult to obtain and are no guarantee of freedom from danger. At the start of the uprising, some correspondents for foreign news organizations were expelled. The correspondents of the *Associated Press* and *Reuters* were arrested and expelled at the start of the uprising, in March 2011. The accreditation of **Khaled Yaquoub Oweis**, the Damascus correspondent for *Reuters*, was withdrawn on 25 March 2011. *Al-Jazeera* closed its office in April 2011 after its journalists



were threatened and assaulted. The Qatar-based station was accused of "lies" and "exaggeration" in its coverage of the protests. Its premises were vandalized.

From May 2011, the authorities began severely restricting foreign journalists' access to Syrian territory, granting visas to the foreign media in dribs and drabs, depending on the organization and on international developments.

Georges Malbrunot of *Le Figaro* was banned from Syria from 2006 to 2011 after he published an article in January 2006 on the Alawite minority, to which Bashar Al-Assad belongs. In August 2011, he accepted an invitation from a group of Syrian industrialists and spent two days in Hama on an Interior Ministry visa. Malbrunot said his *France 3* colleague Caroline Sinz was also there.

*"From Hama I went to Damascus where I spent five days. I met Western diplomats, government opponents and ordinary people, some of whom were hostile to the government and others who were undecided and about whom little is reported. I've been travelling to Syria for almost 20 years and I have my own contacts there. I don't need a local fixer, who is usually linked to the government anyway, but just a translator whenever I need*

one. I went back in September 2012, this time with a press visa, and again in February, June and September 2013."

To get a visa, it's a waiting game. *"It took a year, from 2011 to 2012, before I could go back," Malbrunot said. "AFP, the BBC and CNN also manage to get visas. French find it hard to get visas for Syria. The Syrian authorities believe the French media have been critical of the government from the start, saying its days were numbered, and underestimating Islamist infiltration of the rebels. On the other hand, the authorities want the media to cover the broad picture, not just the activities of the rebels."*

The Syrian authorities proudly announced in March last year that they had granted authorisations to 365 foreign and Arab news organizations since the start of the uprising a year earlier, but in reality many journalists were refused entry to Syria on a press visa. Rémy Ourdan, deputy editor of *Le Monde*, points out that the newspaper has never received a Syrian visa, despite many requests. *"It's the government's decision,"* he said. Reporters are forced to enter illegally, across the Lebanese or Turkish border. In 2011, some managed to get in on a business or tourist visa. Others were able to enter because they did not need a visa, for example those with Lebanese or Algerian passports.

Shortly after the Syrian army shelled the Bab Amr media centre in Homs, killing photographer **Rémi Ochlik** and journalist **Marie Colvin**, the Syrian foreign ministry threatened in a statement on 9 March 2012 that it would take action against any foreign and Arab news organizations and its correspondents who entered Syria illegally, as well as anyone who cooperated with them.

The ministry accused them of collaborating with terrorists and defending their crimes, and of deliberate misinformation. This was reaffirmed by Assad in an interview with *Le Figaro* in September 2013. He was asked: *"Several French journalists are detained in Syria. Do you have any news of them? Are they in the hands of the government?"* He replied: *"If they were taken hostage by the terrorists, you will have to ask them. If anyone is arrested by the government for entering the country illegally, they will be taken to court rather than being held in jail."*

The visa policy for foreign news organizations depends on the geopolitical environment. When the government feels weak or insecure, visas are issued sparingly or only to foreign news organizations regarded as friendly. When the opposition loses ground as a result of the rise in jihadi groups, the

authorities feel stronger and behave with greater confidence, and are thus more disposed to issue much-coveted visas. In September 2013, as France and the United States were considering military strikes against Syria, many Western media organizations were issued with visas.

### 2.2.2: Co-operation with opposition media centres - make-do and mistrust

*"I was working alone during the summer of 2012," Radio France's Omar Ouamane said. "I slept in Turkey and took a taxi to various towns in the Aleppo region. There, I worked with the media centres. They formed a pool and we went to the front line with them alongside the Free Syrian Army. This at least allowed us to work."*

This was confirmed by Luc Mathieu: *"It was easy to be embedded with the FSA. They were always happy for us to go with them. We were able to get around this way, and at no cost."*

What about the dangers in the north of the country? In Mathieu's view, *"at that time, these were all from the government side. There were lots of air raids, not counting snipers and shabbiha (pro-government militia)."*

However, some journalists have criticized the way in which media workers have been "exposed" by FSA brigades and the little leeway they are allowed on the front line. *"In these circumstances, you are not in control and you can't withdraw if there are any problems,"* said Ouamane. "Journalists acted as a kind of communication channel for coverage of FSA attacks and battles."

Other journalists said they were given little leeway when they used the media centres, such as those in Azaz and Aleppo. Some believe the centres are set up by activists as a means of making money from foreign journalists by forcing them go through them to find fixers, translators and drivers. But many reporters already have their own network of contacts. The head of a media centre in Aleppo told Reporters Without Borders in April 2013 that, on the contrary, the centres were key resources for foreign media and that the steps taken were designed to protect and guarantee the safety of journalists. Some expressed concern about the links between the centres and the FSA, and their proximity to rebel bases.

*"It became more difficult to work with the media centres when they started fighting with each other, as occurred after the murder of Abdallah Yassin on 2 March this year,"* recalled Luc Mathieu. Yassin was a soldier who defected to the rebels and became a citizen-journalist in Aleppo, where he also worked as

a fixer and translator for foreign journalists. Rumours about who was behind his murder led to tension and suspicion among the various media centres in Aleppo.

Subsequently, things deteriorated with the radicalization of armed opposition groups and the appearance of Jihadi groups such as Jabhat Al-Nosra. Foreign journalists aroused criticism and suspicion among fighters and the general population. Fighters alleged that, after the journalists' reports were published or broadcast, the places photographed or filmed were bombarded. For Syrians, steeped in the rhetoric of theories and plots since the start of the Assad dictatorship, foreign journalists were seen as spies and quickly became the objects of mistrust. They were also reluctant to take them to the front line. *"People you met told you to switch off your cell phone, take out the battery and not to take photos,"* said Ouamane. *"It wasn't like that back in July last year."*

**Chady Chlela**, the Syria correspondent for *France 24*, had to be evacuated on 29 July last year, just 48 hours after he arrived in the country, after he received serious threats. Spread via social network sites, these threats alleged he was a Shiite agent working for the Syrian government and called for him to be prevented from working with the rebels.

Australian-Lebanese freelance **Rania Abouzeid** said she never lied about her identity, which did not stop her from carrying out many assignments in Syria in rebel-controlled areas. *"Because of my Lebanese accent, some rebels took me for a Hezbollah spy at first,"* she said in July 2013. *"They didn't like some of my stories, such as when I wrote about looting by some armed groups."*

Many fighters and civilians were critical of the coverage of their side of the rebellion, such as the emergence of Jihadi groups in "liberated" areas, which they played down or denied. Some journalists received threats from activists. This gave rise to rumours of a blacklist of foreign journalists who were barred from the area. It was unclear whether it really existed or was the product of disinformation.

## 2.3: "SYRIA MUST NOT DISAPPEAR FROM THE MAP"

*"In Syria as elsewhere, we do our job so that our stories make people think and act,"* said Olivesi. *"But hundreds of stories have been written and people don't see our work as having any effect."*

Mathieu agreed: *"My work as a journalist has achieved nothing. Everything has been written, documented and filmed, but it hasn't meant*

*anything. Well, maybe now and then, but not fundamentally. It is very frustrating and difficult to understand. But I have never asked myself 'what am I doing here?' We all know the reason why we go."*

According to Angel Sastre, *"the main thing is that Syria must not disappear from the map"*.

Fabrice Rousselot, managing editor of *Libération*, said that for security reasons the newspaper's editorial department had decided for the moment not to send any journalists to Syria. The management has decided against joining press trips organized by the Damascus government, which he believes give the journalists too little freedom to report. And the risk of kidnapping is too high for the editorial management to take on the responsibility of sending journalists into the field. In the view of Rémy Ourdan, deputy editor of *Le Monde*, *"the newspaper's management is very cautious about kidnappings, but that doesn't mean we won't be going there"*.

*"Today our work doesn't get much recognition, despite the excessive risks we take,"* said Olivesi. *"Is it worth risking our lives if our work doesn't get published? That one of the reasons why I decided to go to Deir Ezzor in May. Very few journalists have been to the town and not much has been written about it, unlike Aleppo. There are some interesting things about the area, for example the oil angle. I knew that, by going there, I would find good stories."*

*"In our business you get used to a certain instability, the difficulty of predicting how things will work out. But the difference there is that you don't know if you'll be able to go back there,"* said the young journalist, who has chosen to base herself in Antakya *"so that I can stay in contact with Syria, especially with refugees and relief workers"*.

Many colleagues have moved to Istanbul: *"Last winter, about 10 of us were based in Antakya. I'm the only one left."* She added: *"Despite everything, I believe you have to be on the ground to report this conflict."*

Mathieu believes it's too risky to work from Turkey. *"From Lebanon? Definitely not. From Jordan? Difficult because of the attitude of the Jordanian authorities. From Iraq? The problem there is that the government supports Bashar,*



*and ISIS, as its name would indicate, is on both sides of the border. So how do you cover Syria? I don't know. I don't have the answer. We'll just have to wait."*

Foreign journalists are often denied visas or forced to enter the country illegally and wonder every day how they can cover the conflict, while independent Syrian journalists are either arrested or forced to leave the country. Thus Syria's official news outlets have become the non-military arm of the government. Without independent journalists to document the peaceful uprising and its violent repression, Syrian citizens have been organizing and turning themselves into new providers of information. ■



# 3 SYRIAN NEWS ORGANIZATIONS RANGE FROM THE OFFICIAL PRESS TO NEW MEDIA OUTLETS STRIVING FOR INDEPENDENCE

## 3.1: DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA OF THE OFFICIAL MEDIA

During the rule of Hafez Al-Assad, the only registered newspapers, apart from those published by the Baath Party, were the government dailies *Tishreen*, *Al-Baath*, and *Al-Thawra*. The monolithic broadcast media were composed entirely of government-owned radio and television stations.

Bashar Al-Assad lifted the ban on commercial news outlets in 2001, but many restrictions are still in force. Only people within the Baath Party are allowed to publish a newspaper or magazine.

**Lina Chawaf**, former head of programmes at the commercial radio station *Arabesque FM*, said she was never able to get a staff job at a government news organization “*because I didn’t have the right connections and because I’m from Hama*”.

However, this doesn’t stop the government from severely punishing anyone who lapses or takes too much liberty. Thus the government closed down

the popular satirical newspaper *Al-Domari*, run by Ali Farzat, which was the first to be published independently and had a circulation of more than 75,000 compared with the less than 6,000 achieved by other publications. *Al-Domari* was a victim of its own success and popularity and had previously faced harassment, as well as technical and administrative hitches affecting printing and distribution before being finally banned in 2003 after publishing a cartoon on the U.S. intervention in Iraq. The government accused Farzat of supporting the United States, while Syria’s rulers supported Saddam Hussein.

The information ministry ensures publications follow the editorial line set by the party. News organizations are regarded as an instrument of propaganda and a means of controlling the masses. The number of independent journalists in Syria has thus dwindled to just a few. The whole notion of independence is, it would seem, alien to the Baathist system.

After the popular uprising began in March 2011, these propaganda and disinformation outlets became the non-military arm of Bashar Al-Assad’s policies. “*Professional journalists who opposed the government fled the country*,” said Lina Chawaf,

who herself left in August 2011. The rest were killed or jailed, according to Mansour Al-Omari, a journalist who was jailed from February 2012 until February 2013.

The government radio and television stations still have the technical range to cover the whole country but government newspapers, of which only eight survive according to Al-Omari, can only be distributed in areas controlled by the regular army. The official media organizations play a propaganda role.

## 3.2 : “OUR MISSION WAS TO KILL WITH WORDS”

**Fuad Abdel Aziz**, a correspondent for the official news agency *SANA*, was forced to broadcast government lies about the army’s capture of Daraa, the first Syrian city to rebel, in April 2011. His stories were regularly revised and changed to fit the government’s disinformation campaign. The journalist, who was suspected of sympathising with the rebel movement, was sent to Daraa to cover the siege there.

*“I reported on the demonstrations in Daraa,” he said. “Then I was very surprised to see my stories had been completely changed. It was a crude deception. Where I spoke of 50,000 protesters, they had substituted a dozen. Where I mentioned anti-government slogans calling for Bashar’s resignation and an end to rampant corruption, I saw instead an appeal for reform and support for Bashar Al-Assad and a denial that there had been deaths among civilian demonstrators.”*

Chawaf recalled the arrival of intelligence agents in the editorial departments of government media organizations. *“All the journalists could do was sit there and watch, too afraid for the their families to say anything.”*

**Ahmed Fakhoury**, the main news presenter on the government television station, described how the station quickly became the government’s main propaganda tool. The journalists came under great pressure to read out scripts written by the security and intelligence services, as well as dispatches from the official news agency *SANA*.

Referring to disinformation techniques used by the Syrian authorities to filter information, he quoted the example of the demonstrations in Hama on 3 June 2011 in which 106 people were killed. *“Official television showed pictures of the protesters, filmed at close range to show far fewer people than*

*actually took part to make it look like a failure ... The instructions were clear: the demonstrators must be described as terrorists and snipers as agents working for foreign parties.”*

This was supported by **Lama Al-Khadra**, the head of political and cultural programmes at *Damascus Radio*: *“We had routinely to denigrate the protesters, for example by using the terms “armed groups” instead of “demonstrators” and “plot” instead of “protest.”* Fakhoury also said he was forced to broadcast false information about the murder of demonstrators by terrorists during one of the biggest demonstrations, in the Douma district of Damascus in July 2011. He was duped into meeting the head of the judicial inquiry and inspection commission who insisted he avoid attributing any responsibility to the security forces.

**Kamal Jamal Beck**, former programme director for state radio, told *France 24* television: *“It is no longer a real radio station. We were only allowed to use the government news agency SANA as a source. We had lots of reporters on the ground but they were sent to the army side. They also came under pressure. So only one side was covered and, for our part, we were forced to sanitise and distort our reports. If you watched a foreign station such as France 24, the BBC or Al-Jazeera it made them suspicious ... This is definitely a government that is at war with its own people, especially through its official media.”*

*“For years we were banned from discussing politics on air, then we were forced to include calls from listeners who said how much they supported the government. When they told me to turn my weekly programme ‘Zerobesk’, which dealt with social issues, into a political programme, I left,”* said Chawaf.

**Baddour Abdelkarim**, former head of cultural programming at *Damascus Radio*, recalled: *“My colleague Lama Al-Khadra once called a phone number that it emerged belonged to a government opponent, who asked him to respect his comments and not to distort the truth about the murders carried out by the intelligence services.”* The conversation was not allowed to be broadcast and disappeared from the archives and Al-Khadra received a reprimand.

Summing up his work at the radio station, Abdelkarim said: *“Our mission was to kill with words.”* She, Al-Khadra and fellow journalist Kamal Jamal Beck left Syria in December last year. In an interview with *France 24*, Al-Khadra declared: *“Since the start of the uprising, we had the sensation that in our radio news bulletins we were killing the Syrian people with our words.”*

### 3.3: JOURNALISTS UNDER STRICT SURVEILLANCE

Extraordinary surveillance measures were put in place at the *SANA* news agency. Fuad Abdel Aziz left the country in March 2012 after he was arrested on the basis of being reported by the "crisis committee", composed of journalists close to the inner circle and the intelligence service whose job is to monitor journalists and compile a list of media workers who might be a threat to the government or who may wish to leave the country.

Ahmed Fakhouri was arrested in June 2012 and released through the intervention of the interior ministry in October that year.

*"Since we were seen as close to the opposition, some of us came under pressure through our own management or from the security services," said Damascus Radio's Kamal Jamal Beck. "I myself was questioned three times, once by the intelligence service. The first question the officer leading the investigation asked was 'We have information that you are on the side of the people and against the government – is that true?' Each floor of the state radio and television headquarters was guarded by armed men, snipers were posted on the roof and all our comings and goings were watched. The constant harassment and the censorship that was put in place led to a sort of self-censorship."*

The three journalists announced their defection at a news conference in Paris on 13 December 2012, explaining that being forced to broadcast false information since the start of the uprising had been a great hardship, but it had been difficult to resign.

*"The pressure was too great," said Lama Al-Khadra. "We were summoned and we and our families were constantly threatened. They told us 'if you're not afraid for yourself think of your family, your parents, your children, your brothers and sisters.' These were clearly death threats."*

### 3.4: A NEW GENERATION OF JOURNALISTS AND NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

#### 3.4.1: The essential role of the citizen-journalist

As a result of the glaring lack of independence of Syria's official news outlets and the lack of professional journalists covering protests and their repression, as well as the foreign media's difficulties in getting into the country, Syrian citizens have become journalists themselves.

Armed with cell phones and video cameras, they have started covering marches, rallies and other peaceful gatherings. In the light of the repression and the lack of an existing media structure to counter the government's propaganda, citizens have been getting organized, becoming information activists. Networks, cooperative schemes, then media centres were quickly set up. In some cases, a division of labour was created for reasons of security and efficiency. Some filmed demonstrations, others delivered the videos, which were then uploaded and sent to news channels throughout the world. The Syrian uprising soon became the most widely reported and filmed conflict, with Facebook and YouTube being the main platforms where stories were posted.

Every town has its own "media office". At one time Aleppo had about 10 media centres. Jameel Salou said with a smile that in September 2013, the town of Raqqah had at least 39 civilian media offices.

Most citizen-journalists are men aged between 18 and 30. *"There are women, of course, but their numbers have been falling,"* lamented Lina Chawaf. Most have not studied journalism, some have their own careers, some have had a university education, others not, some have money, others have none. *"It wasn't a matter of social class or cultural background,"* said Chawaf.

The great diversity of circumstances made it difficult even to define who the information providers were. In parallel with the collapse of efforts to reach a peaceful settlement and the use of military force,

another category of information provider appeared: the “media activist” inside the military groups. A variety of factors are behind this group, according to *Le Monde* journalist Jean-Philippe Rémy. First, there is the individual who joins an armed group to fight because of his convictions. Then this fighter becomes a communicator, filming his group’s military operations and posting the videos on line in order to promote the group. In this way, each armed group acquires a “media team” composed at least of one cameraman-photographer posting to a Facebook page. The aim is not only to report on the conflict, but also to attract funds from potential international sponsors, particularly in the Gulf.

Rémy mentioned another category: individuals who accompany armed groups but retain the status of civilians and do not take part in the fighting. *“Their work is patchy, but at least they are doing something,”* he said. *“The reporting they do is important.”*

In the last group are those who try to act as journalists and do not restrict themselves to following the operations of the armed groups.

As a general rule, *“these citizen-journalists have become increasingly professional and the quality of the content they produce has improved greatly,”* the journalist Hala Kodmani said at the Institut du monde arabe in Paris on 9 October. *“Some have acquired journalism skills in response to the needs of Arab and international news broadcasters.”*

*Being precise about the places, dates and times the pictures were shot has become automatic. This professionalism is also the result of the training carried out by various non-government organizations.”*

She speaks of an “army of reporters” who are not just amateurs. *“Media activism has become a source of income for many young people, a way of earning a living. Many work for both international and local news organizations.”*

Journalists’ organizations have also sprung up, for example the Syrian Journalists Association, the Free Journalists Coalition, the Syrian Kurdish Journalists Union and the Syrian Kurdistan Journalists’ Syndicate.

### **3.4.2: The emergence of a new umbrella group: new media outlets**

Lina Chawaf, the head of programmes at *Radio Rozana*, says news outlets in Syria fall into two categories: those that support the government and those that support the revolution.

Many new outlets emerged after the uprising began in Syria – newspapers, news agencies, radio stations etc. More than 100 newspapers have started up since March 2011, said Mansour Al-Omari. Many were forced to stop publishing for financial or security reasons, but a lot still circulate today in so-called “liberated” areas.



Many editors stress the importance of the print media because of problems with electricity supplies and uncertainty about the future of the Internet in Syria. All of them spoke of the opportunity to share resources and to have access to more in-depth and detailed analysis. Moreover, *“since we are less immediate, we can avoid messages of hate, or at least contain them,”* one journalist said. It is also a way of leaving a paper trail, a kind of archive. Naji Jiref, the editor of the newspaper *Henta*, notes the importance Syrians attach to the written word. *“Every Syrian has a library.”*

Al-Omari said: *“There are three or four children’s magazines, one or two publications for women and one for young people.”*

Radio is also seen as an important medium, particularly the stations that broadcast on FM. The number of FM stations has been growing, such as Hawa SMART FM (launched by SMART and the Syrian Association of Free Media, which both support Syrian radio outlets, one technically and the other financially), or stations supported by the [Basma activist group](#), or Radio *Al-Aan FM*, but they don’t cover all “liberated” areas. Many transmit only via the Web or by satellite, such as *Yasmine Souria* from Saudi Arabia and *Rozana* from Paris.

Kurdish-language media outlets have also started to appear, for example *Arta FM*, based in Amouda, broadcasts some of its programmes in Kurdish as well as in Syriac and Arabic, and *Radio Al-Kul* has also launched Kurdish-language programming. *Nûdem* is published twice a month in Arabic and Kurdish and *Walat* has a page in Kurdish.

### 3.4.3: Turkey acts as a base for new media outlets

Some new media organizations are based in Syria but, for technical and security reasons, many have decided to open offices or studios outside Syria, for example in Cairo (where *Radio ANA* was based until the disturbances in the Egyptian capital forced it to move to Gaziantep in Turkey), Paris (*Radio Rozana*), the United Arab Emirates (*Radio Al-Aan*), Iraqi Kurdistan (*Nûdem*). However, Turkey is the main location for Syrian new media outlets, mainly for security reasons, as against Lebanon, where the pro-Assad group Hezbollah has its main presence, or Jordan.

Whether in Istanbul, Antakya or Gaziantep, many new media outlets are well established in the country. Radio *Al-Kul* in Istanbul, for example, or the newspaper *Sham* in Antakya (until it was closed down and succeeded by *Sadaa Al-Sham*), the radio station *Nassaim Souria* and some editions of the newspaper *Henta* in Gaziantep. The Syrian Association of Free Media plans to open a news agency (the SMART Agency) and a training centre in Gaziantep in the near future. Although based

in Turkey, these outlets are aimed at Syrians inside Syria and rely on a network of correspondents in the country,

To facilitate distribution, some news outlets are printed inside Syria proper although the editorial staff are based in Turkey to help overcome the technical difficulties caused by the lack of Internet service and poor power supplies. Others operate entirely inside Syria and have their editorial staff and also their printing plant, in the case of the print media, or radio transmitter inside the country. These include some editions of *Henta* (Daraa and the suburbs of Damascus), *Zeitoun* (Saraqeb), *Dawdaa* (Sweida), *Ayn Al-Madina* (Deir Ezzor), *Al-Gherbal* (Kafr Nabl), *Emissa* (Homs), *Basma Haleb* (Aleppo) and *Welat* (Qamishli).

### 3.4.4: Technical and security problems

New media outlets in the so-called “liberated” areas face two main problems: technical and security. Technical difficulties arise from the almost total lack of Internet service and electric power in these areas. *“We can’t work without the Internet or electricity,”* said freelance Massoud Akko. In areas near the Turkish or Iraqi borders, people use the Iraqi and Turkish telephone and Internet networks. But it is more difficult to work in more remote areas nearer the centre of the country where expensive satellite equipment is needed. Akko gave the example of the Afrin district, where news and information providers must travel up to 40 km by car in order to file their stories if they have no satellite equipment.

Security in the “liberated” area is the second problem facing these new editorial teams, which are increasingly the target of threats from ISIS, as well as from other sources: *“The military aims to control media organizations in the towns that it takes over,”* said Mansour Al-Omari.

Securing independent funding without political strings attached also causes significant problems, according to *Nûdem* editor Massoud Hamid. It should be noted that every political group and every battalion has its own news outlet, for example the Muslim Brotherhood newspaper *Al-Ahd* and *Ronahi TV*, run by the Democratic and Union Party (PYD).

### 3.4.5: The challenge of independence

Most citizen-journalists have had no basic training in journalism and work from emotion, notes Lina Chawaf. Faced with government propaganda about the uprising, *“revolutionary news outlets”* have sprung up, acting as the propaganda arm of the revolution. *“This applies mainly to radio stations, and to a lesser extent newspapers,”* the *Rozana* programme head said.

While wishing to present themselves as diametrically opposed to the official media, new media outlets have nonetheless copied the government pattern,

taking the line that “if you are not with us, you are against us” which flies in the face of media impartiality. A new dictatorship has arisen among journalists who romanticize the revolution and the armed opposition. This was confirmed by trainer Alaa Al-Rashidi: *“Many confuse revolution with journalism.”*

*“Few are critical of the revolution,”* observed Mansour Al-Omari. A journalist encountered in Gaziantep in April 2 2013 said that, for him, *“it is impossible to be independent as a journalist nowadays. You cannot – and should not – be so.”*

In April 2013, many journalists and activists said they believed that the mission of these new media outlets was to *“protect the revolution”* and that it was not a priority to discuss the abuses committed by opposition armed groups. There were many who wanted to report what was really happening on the ground, rejecting the clichés spread by news organizations. In discussions held by Reporters Without Borders in Turkey in September 2013, the debate had softened somewhat.

In Massoud Hamid's view: *“There is no media independence, mainly because of funding issues.”* Lina Chawaf was more circumspect: *“The biggest obstacle to media independence is not so much funding, but the Syrians themselves. Citizen-journalists use the same rhetoric as the government: ‘if you disagree with me, you are my enemy’. Most do not understand the stance of journalists who do not express their own opinions. It will take at least two generations for attitudes to change.”* Another editor agreed: *“Now and again, when journalists send me their stories, it seems like I am reading a story from the government press, but from the opposite point of view. The expressions and the style are the same.”*

A number of schemes have been launched, for example the creation of a code of conduct and media ethics. ■

# 4

# REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS SUPPORTS INFORMATION PROVIDERS IN SYRIA

Reporters Without Borders defends freedom of information and those involved in it on a daily basis. It has taken a series of concrete steps to help information providers in Syria, from the loan and dispatch of protective equipment, legal and material support for journalists in danger and lobbying international organization.

## 4.1: PROTECTION OF JOURNALISTS

The growing danger and the increase in abductions and killings have forced most international media outlets to stop sending staff into the field. Most of those covering the conflict in Syria today are freelancers, who don't have the means to pay for basic security equipment and insurance. The lack of experience of conflict zones among some freelancers puts them in a vulnerable position.

The organization lends bullet-proof vests and protective helmets free of charge to freelance journalists who register. The vests are imprinted with the word "PRESS" and are available in small, medium and large sizes. They weigh about 15 kg each and can be borrowed for up to a month. The khaki-coloured composite helmets weigh about 1.5 kg.

Freelance journalists can also take out insurance through Reporters Without Borders. More and more freelancers are covering conflicts and too often they are not insured, mainly because of the prohibitive cost but also the lack of information. Reporters Without Borders has signed an agreement with the company April International Canada (formerly Escapade Assurances Voyages) to provide freelance reporters with insurance at a preferential rate. Since Reporters Without Borders inaugurated the scheme in late 2002, nearly 400 freelance journalists have

taken out insurance through the organization, particularly those going to Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Sudan.

Reporters Without Borders has a **Digital Survival Kit** available for Syrian information providers to help them cope with the government's online offensive.

The kit is available via the RWB website [WeFightCensorship.org](http://WeFightCensorship.org) and comprises practical tools, advice and technical resources to teach netizens how to bypass censorship and ensure their communications and data are secure. Reporters Without Borders has supplied Syrian information providers with USB memory sticks containing encryption software and has provided VPNs for them to use.

The Reporters Without Borders "Handbook for Journalists", compiled in partnership with UNESCO, is also available. The handbook is aimed at those travelling to dangerous parts of the world. It sets out international legal norms that protect freedom of the press and gives practical advice on how to avoid pitfalls in the field. As regards psychological support, RWB makes journalists aware of how to detect post-mission trauma and provides professional contacts who can help them cope with it.

Reporters Without Borders supports the report published in August 2013 by the Lebanon-based SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, based on a meeting in Beirut in July that was attended by international journalists covering the Syrian conflict. The report examines security on the ground, best practices, what kinds of assistance are available to freelance journalists and what they can expect from their employers. The report summarises the discussions, makes specific recommendations, and includes a document compiled by the participants entitled "Minimum Working Standards for Journalists in Conflict Zones".

## 4.2 ASSISTANCE TO JOURNALISTS IN EXILE

Repression, violence and threats carried out by press freedom predators in Syria have led to the departure of dozens of Syrian professional journalists and citizen-journalists since the popular uprising began in March 2011.

By the end of September 2013, Reporters Without Borders had a list of 116 Syrian news and information providers forced into exile for reasons of security. Nearly 30 have fled since the start of 2013.

Most have ended up in neighbouring countries in precarious circumstances. Some forced to leave suddenly have found themselves penniless in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon or Egypt. Besides the lack of money, the attitude of the authorities in the host countries is a major cause for concern. Reports are growing of interrogation by Jordanian security services and intimidation by Egyptian law enforcement officials. Thousands of Syrian refugees have fled Egypt as a result of persecution after President Mohamed Morsi was removed from office in July 2013. In Lebanon, after they manage to get into the country, a perennial problem, Syrian refugees face the issue of the right of residence, a particular problem for Palestinians from Syria. Reporters Without Borders is following the cases of two Palestinian information providers from Syria who have been ordered to leave Lebanon.

Against this background, the organization has awarded 34 assistance grants to Syrian news providers since April 2011. This aid, mainly designed to help meet their basic needs, has allowed professional journalists and citizen-journalists to find a safe place or move to a safe country. Reporters Without Borders also supports visa applications and requests for international protection by Syrian information providers. In the past year, the organization has written some 30 letters of support for Syrian journalists in exile.

## 4.3 TRAINING FOR NEW INFORMATION PROVIDERS

Reporters Without Borders has partnered with the Syrian radio station Radio Rozana, launched in June 2013 together with International Media Support, Canal France International and Radio Netherland Worldwide.

Reporters Without Borders organizes training session for the print media aimed at strengthening the editorial neutrality and objectivity of new newspapers and ensuring those who work for them are protected physically and online.

The organization provides training for Syrian information providers and foreign journalists travelling to Syria, aimed at improving the protection of their data and communications.

The organization also provides equipment such as computers, scanners and printers to Syrian new media outlets that need them to fulfil their role of informing the public.

## 4.4: PUBLICITY CAMPAIGNS TO EXPOSE VIOLATIONS OF FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Since the start of the uprising in Syria, Reporters Without Borders has ceaselessly sought to expose violations of freedom of the press in the country. The organization has made awards and undertaken publicity campaigns in support of this:

- December 2011 -- [Ali Ferzat receives the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Prize](#)
- May 2011 -- [RWB holds a protest outside the Syrian embassy in Paris, painting the slogan "It's ink that should flow, not blood" on the wall.](#)
- March 2012 – The media centre of the Local Coordination Committees is awarded the 2012 Reporters Without Borders Netizen Prize.
- [Siri vs Syria campaign](#)
- December 2012 – Syrian journalist Mazen Darwish is awarded the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Prize.

Reporters Without Borders is a member of the support committee for journalists held hostage in Syria. It has also disseminated appeals from the families of the kidnapped journalists Austin Tice, Bashar Kadumi and James Foley.

## 4.5: PUTTING THE CASE AGAINST IMPUNITY AT THE UN

In parallel, Reporters Without Borders has campaigned for the 1976 UN Security Council resolution 1738 on the safety of journalists to be extended to include citizen-journalists.

In a statement issued on 2 October 2013, the Security Council president once again condemned *"the widespread violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by the Syrian authorities, as well as any such abuses and violations by armed groups"*. He added: *"Stressing the need to end impunity for violations of international humanitarian law and violations and abuses of human rights, the Council reaffirmed that those who had committed or were otherwise responsible for such violations and abuses in Syria must be brought to justice."* (S/PRST/2013/15).

Reporters Without Borders regrets that the statement did not refer to journalists, although it closely concerns information providers. Security Council resolution 1738 on the safety of journalists, and the Geneva Conventions, are designed to protect journalists and combat the impunity of those responsible for physically attacking them.

The Council president's appeal for an end to the impunity of those responsible for abuses is likely to fall on deaf ears, however, so long as the Council cannot agree to refer them to the International Criminal Court (ICC) as called for by the UN High Commissioner for Human rights, Navi Pillay, among many world figures.

The jurisdiction of the ICC over the crimes specified in its Statute means it is not permitted to try abuses committed in Syria. Even if these can be qualified as war crimes or crimes against humanity, Syria is not a party to the Statute and it is assumed those allegedly responsible are not nationals of a country other than Syria, which may have ratified the Rome Statute.

For the time being, abuses against information providers are committed with total impunity. Any investigation into such abuses is extremely rare. In France, investigating judges have been ordered to look into the attack in Homs in February 2012 in which the French photographer Rémi Ochlik was killed and the French journalist Edith Bouvier seriously injured, as well as the murder in the same city of France 2 TV correspondent Gilles Jacquier a few weeks earlier.

Reporters Without Borders has several times pointed out the difficulties that journalists face in Syria, for example to the UN Human Rights Council in September 2013 (see written report A/HRC/24/NGO/62) and has taken part in sessions on journalists' safety. ■

## THEY WENT FOR YOUR SAKE AND, WITH YOUR HELP, THEY WILL RETURN

Reporters Without Borders works closely with a support committee for Didier François, Edouard Elias, Pierre Torres and Nicolas Hénin, four French journalists who have been hostages in Syria since June 2013. The committee was formed as soon as it was announced that François and Elias had been kidnapped north of Aleppo. It is headed by three well-known French journalists – Serge July, Karen Lajon and Florence Aubenas, who was herself a hostage in Iraq. The committee's job is to monitor the status of the hostages and issue alerts in the event of any developments.

Activities are organized every month to press for their release, including demonstrations throughout France, events organized with local authorities and writing opinion pieces about their plight. An online petition for their release is available at this site: [www.otagesensyrie.org](http://www.otagesensyrie.org). It has already been signed by nearly 9,000 people.



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## LEXIQUE

- **FSA:** Free Syrian Army
- **Hay'at shar'iya:** Shariah courts, responsible for applying Islamic law
- **ISIS:** acronym of the jihadi group the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (or Dawla islamiwa li-'Irak wa Sham, of which the Arabic acronym used by the Syrians is da'eish)
- **Jabhat Al-Nosra:** jihadi group added to the list of terrorist organizations by the United States in December 2012
- **Katiba:** brigade
- **Kafir/kufar:** ungodly, heathen
- **Liwa:** battalion
- **Mukhabarat:** intelligence services
- **PYD:** Democratic and Union Party, affiliated to the Kurdistan Workers party (PKK)
- **Shabbih / Shabbiha:** a militiaman in the pay of the regular army or the intelligence services



**REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS** is an international press freedom organisation. It monitors and reports violations of media freedom throughout the world. Reporters Without Borders analyses the information it obtains and uses press releases, letters, investigative reports and recommendations to alert public opinion to abuses against journalists and violations of free expression, and to put pressure on politicians and government officials.

General director : **CHRISTOPHE DELOIRE**  
Head of Middle-East & North Africa desk : **SOAZIG DOLLET**  
[middle-east@rsf.org](mailto:middle-east@rsf.org)

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