
Commentary

Rebuilding the Fourth Estate

Towards Media Freedom and Reform in Syria

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Rebuilding the Fourth Estate:

Towards Media Freedom and Reform in Syria

As Syria enters a delicate transitional phase after years of conflict and authoritarian control, the country's media sector stands at a pivotal crossroads. Once tightly muzzled under a centralized state monopoly, Syrian media during the war exploded into a mosaic of new voices and platforms. This transformation brought both opportunity and peril. On one hand, a fractured media landscape now reflects Syria's diverse communities and viewpoints, offering the potential for a more pluralistic public discourse. On the other hand, that same fragmentation has fueled sharp polarization and competing narratives, sometimes laced with hate speech and disinformation. The pressing challenge for Syria's transition is to harness the positive power of media diversity while mitigating its risks – to build a free, independent, and inclusive media ecosystem that supports social cohesion, democratic dialogue, and accountability. Achieving this will require navigating core dilemmas (pluralism vs. polarization, independence vs. co-optation), learning from international experiences in fragile contexts, and drawing on the resilience of Syria's own journalistic community.

The Fractured Media Landscape: Pluralism vs. Polarization

Over more than a decade of upheaval, Syria's media space has transformed from a singular state-controlled narrative into a cacophony of outlets across liberated, regime-held, and exile arenas. Dozens of new television channels, radio stations, newspapers, and digital platforms emerged. This diverse landscape spans local community news pages, opposition-affiliated broadcasters, citizen journalism initiatives, and outlets backed by various international sponsors or political factions. In principle, such pluralism is a strength: it gives voice to Syria's many narratives and previously marginalized communities.

Local media platforms like Daraa 24, Alrased, Suwayda 24, ARTA FM, Focus Aleppo, for example, have been able to cover grassroots issues and daily realities that a centralized national outlet might overlook. Nationally oriented outlets founded by Syrian journalists in exile, such as Enab Baladi, Rozana, Elkhadr TV, Syrian Anonymous Journalists (صوت سوري), have sought to speak to Syrians as a whole, bridging those inside and outside the country. Together, this patchwork paints a richer, more inclusive portrait of Syrian society.

Yet pluralism's flip side has been extreme polarization. With each outlet often catering to a specific geography or political constituency, Syrians have lived in information silos, frequently hearing only what aligns with their loyalties. During the conflict, media became another battleground: pro-regime channels pumped out propaganda and demonization of opponents, while some opposition outlets

answered with equally one-sided narratives. Social media further amplified hate speech and rumor across sectarian or ethnic divides. The result is a fragmented public sphere where trust is scarce and facts are bitterly contested. The dilemma is clear: How can Syria ensure diversity of media without cementing social division? In the transition, it will be crucial to encourage a multitude of voices but also establish shared standards and forums for dialogue. Mechanisms like nationwide journalist codes of ethics, cross-outlet collaborations, and forums for public debate can help transform raw diversity into constructive pluralism – where media compete in quality and ideas, not in incitement or zero-sum narratives.

Resilience and Self-Regulation: Independent Media Emerges

Amid war and state collapse in parts of Syria, a remarkable story has been the emergence of independent media sustained by courageous journalists and citizen reporters. In the absence of centralized control, Syrians in various regions took it upon themselves to create outlets that serve their communities' need for information. Local news networks such as Suwayda 24 in the south or Arta FM radio in the northeast arose to cover community affairs in real time, from service disruptions to human rights violations. These outlets, often run on shoestring budgets, have built trust by being close to their communities – understanding local dialects, grievances, and aspirations better than any distant broadcaster could.

At the same time, Syrian media professionals have come together across ideological and geographic lines to self-organize and uphold standards. Early in the conflict, independent journalists formed bodies like the Syrian Journalists Association (Rabitat as-Sahafiyeen) as an alternative union to advocate for reporters' rights and professional development. Networks such as the Syrian Female Journalists Network and the Syrian Kurdish Journalists Network were established to ensure representation of women and Kurdish voices in media, promoting diversity and inclusion within the sector itself. Perhaps most impressively, dozens of outlet founders and editors collaborated to create a "Charter of Honor" – a voluntary ethical code committing Syrian media to principles of truthfulness, respect, and avoidance of incitement. Through this charter and its monitoring commission, media outlets attempted to hold themselves accountable to higher standards even amid the chaos of war.

These examples of local resilience and self-regulation highlight a vital fact: Syrian journalists have not waited passively for top-down reform – they have been actively building the norms and institutions of a healthier media on their own. Any transitional media strategy should recognize and build upon this foundation. The courage and initiative shown by Syrian reporters, editors, and activists in creating independent outlets and peer accountability mechanisms will remain essential assets in the next phase. They demonstrate that free media culture can take root even in hostile conditions, given the commitment of those involved. Nurturing this nascent culture, rather than dismantling or ignoring it, will be key to Syria's media future.

Guarding Independence: The Role of Institutions and Law

With a new political chapter opening, Syria's media faces a question: will it truly become independent, or simply change masters? Professional independence hangs in the balance. During the conflict, every side sought to influence media – whether through funding friendly outlets, intimidating critical voices, or monopolizing narratives. Now, as a post-conflict state takes shape, the risk is that old habits of control could reassert themselves under new guises. Transitional authorities might be tempted to co-opt media as a mouthpiece, or powerful business and foreign interests could capture the emergent press through financing leverage. To prevent a backslide into propaganda or oligarchy-driven journalism, strong institutions and legal guarantees must underpin the media sector's independence.

Central to this is the revitalization of media institutions like unions, associations, and regulatory bodies. The Syrian Journalists Union – long the official syndicate under the former regime – will need to transform itself from a tool of state propaganda into a genuine defender of journalists' rights and integrity. Encouragingly, the Union retains a broad membership and historical legitimacy that, if coupled with internal reform, could make it an umbrella for all Syrian media professionals regardless of political background. Its mandate in the transition should be to protect editorial freedom, advocate for members' safety and labor rights, and mediate disputes through professional norms rather than political decrees. This requires opening its ranks and governance to the new generation of independent journalists who emerged during the revolution, including those from previously excluded groups. An inclusive, reformed Union could become a cornerstone of sector self-governance, complementing state institutions.

In parallel, independent associations like the Syrian Journalists Association and the various networks should coordinate closely with the Union and each other. Rather than competing for primacy, all these bodies share a common interest in a free and flourishing press. Regular coordination meetings, joint committees, or even a federation of Syrian media organizations could help unify standards and present a strong front against any attempts to undermine press freedom. Negative competition must give way to collaboration – an understanding that the entire sector rises or falls together. Media organizations, whether syndicates or NGOs, must also engage constructively with a future Ministry of Information (or its equivalent) to craft enlightened media policies. If the government involves journalists' representatives in shaping new media laws, regulatory agencies, and public media reforms, it can earn buy-in and avoid policies that alienate the very people who will implement them.

Legal reforms will also be pivotal in guaranteeing independence. Decades-old censorship laws and emergency statutes that muzzled the press should be repealed or replaced with legislation that enshrines freedom of expression and the press as fundamental rights. A modern media law is needed – one that ensures transparency in media ownership, prevents monopolies, and defines clear limits on government interference. Such a law can establish an independent Media Commission or Broadcast Authority to oversee licensing and standards in a fair, apolitical manner. The aim should be to create guardrails against both state and non-state pressures – for instance, by prohibiting security agencies from policing journalism, and by requiring disclosure of funding sources

to curb hidden propaganda. Drafting these laws in consultation with Syrian media stakeholders and international experts would align them with global best practices while rooting them in local reality. Ultimately, the transition should produce a legal environment where being a journalist no longer means navigating a minefield of arbitrary red lines, but rather operating under clear rules that protect press freedom and accountability alike.

Media Governance in Fragile Contexts: International Insights

Syria is not the first nation to grapple with media reform amid a fragile post-conflict transition. From the Balkans to sub-Saharan Africa, international experience offers valuable lessons on what can help – and what to avoid – when rebuilding a media sector in a divided society.

One common lesson is the importance of independent regulatory bodies. In Bosnia and Herzegovina after the 1990s war, for example, international overseers helped establish a national communications commission to license broadcasters and enforce basic journalistic standards, in an effort to curb the rampant ethno-nationalist propaganda that had fueled conflict. While results were mixed, the principle was sound: an impartial referee for the media field can set minimum rules (like fair access for different groups and bans on hate speech) without dictating content. Similarly, post-war Kosovo created an Independent Media Commission that brought together media professionals from different communities to regulate broadcasting collaboratively. For Syria, empowering a multi-stakeholder media commission – with representatives from the journalist syndicates, civil society, and legal community – could help manage the transition from chaos to order, ensuring that basic norms are upheld while political control is kept at arm's length.

Another insight is the need to transform state media into public service media. In many transitions, the old state-run TV and radio – often propaganda tools – were reformed (or at least intended to be) into genuine public broadcasters. Countries like South Africa and Eastern European states in the 1990s undertook such efforts, with varying degrees of success. The core idea is to preserve the reach and resources of national media outlets but reorient their mission to serve the public interest, not the regime or any single faction. For Syria, this could mean taking institutions like Syrian state television or the official SANA news agency and establishing new governance boards including independent journalists, opposition and civil society figures, and technocrats. Editorial independence must be guaranteed by law and practice, turning these outlets into platforms for balanced news, cultural programming, and inclusive national dialogue. While skepticism of any ex-regime media will be high, successful reform could provide Syria with influential media that is neither partisan nor beholden to advertisers – a potentially unifying national narrative platform in a fractured society.

Donor support and sustainability form a further balancing act. International donors (governments, NGOs, media development organizations) often inject funding and training into post-conflict media. Indeed, Syrian independent media owes much to such support over the past decade. This assistance can be transformative – enabling the launch of new outlets, training journalists in investigative reporting or conflict-sensitive journalism, and providing equipment and technology. However, over-reliance on external funding can be a double-edged sword. It may skew editorial priorities to donor

agendas or create short-lived projects that vanish once grants dry up. Best practices suggest that donor support in transitions should be transitional itself: front-loaded to kick-start media pluralism and capacity, but paired with strategies for building domestic sustainability. For Syrian media, international aid should focus on infrastructure (e.g. rebuilding studios, press facilities destroyed in war), professional training programs, and seed funding for outlets, while also encouraging revenue models like subscriptions, advertising, or community support that can take over in the longer term. Equally important is that donor support comes with no political strings attached – it must reinforce independence, not become another form of influence.

Finally, fragile contexts underscore the critical importance of journalist safety and professionalism. In places like Iraq or Afghanistan, newfound media freedom after conflict was dampened by high rates of violence against journalists and a lack of skilled reporters to fill the new space. A free press on paper means little if journalists fear for their lives or lack the tools to do quality reporting. International experience shows the need for special measures in transitions: journalist protection mechanisms (hotlines, police liaisons, legal aid for threatened reporters), and massive investment in journalism education, from basic skills to investigative techniques. In Syria, where journalists have always feared been killed, jailed, or exiled, the transition must make safety a non-negotiable priority. This could include creating a special prosecutor's office for crimes against media workers, rapid response units to address threats, and partnerships with international organizations for safety training. Professionalism will come with time and training – Syria has no shortage of talented storytellers and courageous truth-seekers, but they will benefit from exchange programs, scholarships, and mentorship from international media peers who have gone through similar nation-building challenges.

Media's Role in Reconciliation and Justice

Beyond the nuts and bolts of laws and institutions, Syrian media in transition will play a profound role in shaping the country's broader healing process. Free and responsible media are not only essential for political accountability; they are also pivotal for social reconciliation and transitional justice. In societies emerging from years of atrocity and trauma, the stories that get told – and heard – can either bridge divides or deepen them.

A healthy Syrian media ecosystem can provide a platform for an inclusive national conversation after conflict. This means ensuring that all segments of Syrian society see themselves represented in the media narrative. Voices of the displaced, of minority ethnic and religious groups, of women, of former adversaries in the conflict – all should have access to tell their stories and offer their perspectives on the country's future. When media outlets make a conscious effort to feature diverse voices and viewpoints, they help foster a sense of shared belonging and empathy. For example, a radio program that brings together mothers from different sides of the conflict to talk about their hopes for their children can humanize "the other" and highlight common ground. Investigative reports that shine light on the suffering of ordinary people in all regions can build a shared narrative of the pain Syrians endured, creating public pressure that "never again" should such horror be

repeated. This kind of journalism nourishes social cohesion by emphasizing a common Syrian identity above narrower loyalties.

In terms of transitional justice, media will be the critical conduit between formal justice processes and the public. As Syria confronts the legacy of war – potentially through truth commissions, war crimes trials, or local reconciliation committees – the press must be free to cover these processes in depth. Quality media coverage can amplify the impact of transitional justice efforts: reporting on court proceedings against perpetrators, broadcasting testimony of victims and survivors, explaining the findings of any truth-seeking body, and holding those processes accountable to their promises. In countries like Sierra Leone and Colombia, for instance, radio and print media were instrumental in disseminating the truths uncovered by truth commissions, ensuring they reached remote communities and sparked dialogue about past abuses. Syrian journalists will face the task of reporting on painful truths from the conflict – about massacres, disappearances, chemical attacks, and other crimes – in a manner that is sensitive but unflinching. By doing so, they help create a historical record that all Syrians can access, rather than leaving the past to be rewritten by propagandists. Moreover, responsible media can push back against denial and revisionism by fact-checking false narratives about the war, thereby supporting a more honest reconciliation.

Of course, these high ambitions depend on media maintaining integrity and fairness. If media outlets simply become mouthpieces for partisan versions of history or vengeance, they can inflame tensions and sabotage justice. That is why the commitment to professionalism and ethics, mentioned earlier, is so crucial. Coverage of transitional justice must give space to all sides of a story and be careful not to jeopardize due process – for instance, refraining from declaring someone guilty before a verdict, but still rigorously investigating allegations. It's a delicate balance of truth-telling and impartiality. Done right, Syrian media can help the nation not only know the truth of what happened, but also collectively reckon with it – a foundation for lasting peace.

Way Forward: Building a Healthy Media Ecosystem

Crafting a vibrant media sector that serves the public interest in Syria's transition will require concerted efforts on multiple fronts. The following are key pillars for building a healthy, inclusive media ecosystem in the coming years:

- **Enshrine Media Freedom and Pluralism in Law:**
The new Syria should explicitly protect freedom of the press and expression in its constitutional and legal framework. Modern media laws must replace old censorship regimes, guaranteeing the right to publish and broadcast without prior restraint. At the same time, laws should uphold pluralism – for example, preventing any single entity from monopolizing media ownership and ensuring fair access for different groups to frequencies and licenses.
- **Establish Independent Oversight:**
Create or empower a media regulatory commission that operates independently of political

control. Such a body can oversee licensing, enforce basic journalistic standards (like truthfulness and avoidance of hate speech), and mediate complaints. Its board should include respected media professionals, legal experts, and civil society members. By acting as a neutral arbiter, it can help build public trust that media are accountable but not censored by the government.

- **Strengthen and Unify Media Institutions:**

Support the reform of the Syrian Journalists Union into a democratic, inclusive body truly representative of all journalists. Encourage formal cooperation between the Union, the Syrian Journalists Association, and specialized networks (women journalists, Kurdish journalists, etc.) so they present a united front on issues of media policy and ethics. A coordinated professional community can better advocate for common interests like journalist safety, fair wages, and editorial independence.

- **Invest in Professional Capacity and Ethics:**

With years of isolation and conflict behind, Syrian media needs a renaissance in skills and standards. Launch training programs in journalism, ideally with partnerships between local experts and international media development organizations. Update journalism school curricula and establish exchange scholarships to expose young Syrian reporters to global best practices. Simultaneously, promote strong ethical codes (building on the existing Charter of Honor) and integrate them into newsroom culture through workshops and leadership buy-in. Professional, skilled journalists are the backbone of a resilient media sector.

- **Ensure Safety and Security for Journalists:**

Make the protection of media workers a top priority from day one of the transition. This includes ending impunity for attacks – prosecuting those who harmed journalists in the past and making clear that new offenses will be swiftly addressed. The government and media associations should collaborate on safety protocols, hotlines, and possibly a press freedom ombudsman to monitor and respond to threats. When journalists feel secure, they can tackle sensitive investigations and speak truth to power without fear, greatly enhancing media's quality and courage.

- **Promote Financial Sustainability and Independence:**

Encourage diverse and sustainable business models for media outlets so they are not overly dependent on single sponsors or political patrons. This might involve incubator programs for media startups, community-supported journalism initiatives (such as membership or crowdfunding models), and eventually developing an advertising market as stability returns. Public funding can also play a role – for instance, a public broadcasting service or grants for local media – but these must be allocated through non-partisan, transparent mechanisms to avoid becoming tools of influence. The international community can assist with seed funding and infrastructure, but ultimately Syrian media must build its own economic foundations to remain independent in the long run.

By pursuing these strategies in tandem, Syria can lay the groundwork for a media sector that truly underpins its transition to peace and democracy. None of this will be easy – deep structural challenges persist, from economic hardships to lingering political distrust. Yet the transitional period offers a rare window of opportunity to reorient the media landscape fundamentally. What is needed is a genuine commitment from all stakeholders to treat media as a cornerstone of the new Syria, not as a commodity to be controlled or a threat to be muted.

In conclusion, building a free, independent, and inclusive media is not a luxury in Syria's transitional period – it is a necessity on par with establishing new political institutions or reviving the economy. A pluralistic media that holds power to account and facilitates nationwide conversation will strengthen the legitimacy and responsiveness of the emerging Syrian state. Moreover, a media that is professional and united in core values can help heal a fractured society by providing a shared space for Syrians to tell their stories, debate their future, and rediscover common ground. The stakes could not be higher: there can be no democracy without a free press, no enduring peace without a shared narrative of reconciliation carried by that press, and no national unity without an open forum for dialogue. As Syria stands at this crossroads, the way its media is rebuilt may well determine the success of the entire transition. The tools, talent, and even nascent institutions are already in place – now it is about having the vision and will to empower them. Syria's journalists have shown they can be agents of resilience; with the right support, they can also be architects of a more hopeful, inclusive future for their country.