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Emerging Media Structures, Media Policy and the Challenge of Disinformation in Post-Assad Syria

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Imprint

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Executive Summary

This study analyses the media ecosystem in post-Assad Syria, focusing on the proliferation of disinformation, ethno-sectarian hate speech and Foreign Interference (FIMI). It covers the period from December 2024 to December 2025, one year after the collapse of the Assad regime. Besides disinformation, the research examines emerging media structures, media policies of the transitional government, and the professional conditions of journalists across different regions of Syria. The study is based on field research conducted in Damascus in September and November 2025, semi-structured interviews with approximately 60 stakeholders —including government officials, journalists, and media experts from eight Syrian cities— in-depth desk research, social media analysis and a focus group discussion with Syrian media professionals held during a workshop in Amman.

The political context of the study is dominated by the rise to power of Ahmad Al-Sharaa, who was appointed interim president in January 2025, and key figures of the former Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) leadership. The transitional government faces substantial challenges related to state reconstruction, security, economic recovery, and demands for transitional justice. At the same time, relations among Syria's ethno-confessional communities —particularly Sunnis, Alawites, Christians, Druze, and Kurds— remain strained. Atrocities targeting Alawites in the coastal region in March 2025 and Druze in Suwaida in July 2025 have undermined public trust in the new government authorities.

Within this broader context, the Syrian media landscape is undergoing significant transformation. State media institutions, such as the television channel *Al-Ikhbariya*, the news agency *SANA*, and the newspaper *Al-Thawra*, have adjusted their editorial lines and now largely support the new government, with limited critical coverage. The state media sector employs an estimated 7,000–8,000 staff, but displays pronounced salary inequalities between long-standing employees and newly appointed executives from Idlib. Media outlets funded by Qatar, including *Syria Now* and *Syria TV*, have gained prominence due to their close alignment with the new authorities.

While some exile media outlets have begun to return to Syria, local and independent media organisations continue to operate under precarious financial conditions. In the Kurdish-controlled northeast of Syria (AANES), an autonomous media system persists, though it has been severely affected by the withdrawal of U.S. funding.

Disinformation represents a central challenge in the Syrian media and information environment, particularly given the dominance of social media and messaging platforms as primary news sources. The study identifies multiple actors involved in coordinated disinformation campaigns. These include remnants of the former regime (Foloul), who seek to destabilise the transitional authorities as well as foreign actors—for example Russia, Iran, Israel and Turkey—that pursue their own geopolitical interests partly through coordinated campaigns; and ISIS propaganda, which routinely calls for attacks on Alawites, Shias, Christians, Druze, Kurds, and other groups it casts as enemies. Most of the various ethno-religious communities are both targets and producers of disinformation. Competing narratives centred on victimhood, revenge, and revisionism have contributed to cycles of mistrust and fear. Disinformation, hate speech, and propaganda are primarily disseminated via Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram.

Based on these findings, the study proposes five policy recommendations: (1) the establishment of a Syria Media and Disinformation Observatory to monitor and analyse disinformation trends; (2) the development of a context-sensitive media literacy toolkit; (3) sustained international funding for public interest media; (4) cross-regional professional networking and training programmes for Syrian journalists; and (5) youth-focused initiatives aimed at promoting social cohesion. The study concludes that the future development of a pluralistic media system in Syria will depend largely on internal power dynamics within the ruling elites, particularly the balance between ideological hardliners and more pragmatic actors.

1

Introduction

This research focuses on the Syrian media ecosystem that emerged in the year following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, when disinformation and inflammatory speech played a crucial role in escalating ethno-sectarian tension and armed conflict. The report explores the impact of disinformation and prevalent news narratives on Syria's various ethno-sectarian communities, examining the use of traditional and new media technologies whilst analysing the government's new media policy. It also examines the new working conditions of journalists operating in different regions of the country. Another focus of this research is the coexistence of partial and parallel media environments that promote competing narratives, thereby nurturing different cultures of journalism.

The purpose of this report is to provide actionable knowledge for media professionals, policymakers, and academics in the field of media development in Syria. The research was initiated by Asiem El Difraoui and conducted by Asiem El Difraoui, Carola Richter and Anja Wollenberg as principal researchers. It is part of a broader media literacy programme for Syrian journalists implemented between August and December 2025 by Media in Cooperation and Transition GmbH (MiCT) with funding from the German Federal Foreign Office.

This report addresses the following questions: How has the Syrian media landscape changed since December 2024 and what are the fault lines of fragmentation in the current media system? How do media policy and power relations shape the new working conditions for journalists? How do disinformation and ethno-sectarian hate speech spread, and who is involved? What narratives prevail in disinformation campaigns, and what impact do they have on ethno-sectarian communities?

The research offers an analysis of the media and disinformation landscape in Syria in 2025. It provides key insights for a deeper understanding of its long-term challenges, even as the Syrian political context continues to evolve rapidly.

2

Methodology

This report uses data gathered during two field visits to Damascus in September and November 2025, which involved interviews with government officials, media experts, and journalists from various media outlets that represent different political affiliations. The sample of interviewees included journalists from at least 8 different cities (Suwaida, Qamishli, Kobani, Latakia, Idlib, Aleppo, Damascus, Homs). Several interviews were also conducted with Syrian journalists and media producers in exile. In addition, academic and policy experts were also interviewed, and a focus group discussion with media makers from different Syrian regions was organised during a workshop in Amman (Jordan) in mid-November 2025. In total, approximately 60 individuals participated in conversations with the researchers. For security reasons, we offered interviewees full anonymity. Names will not be disclosed in this report.

In order to study key narratives and players in the realm of disinformation and misinformation, we also reviewed and evaluated a large body of social media content from a variety of channels and platforms.

The research report was peer-reviewed by Lana Kazkaz (associate professor, Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations) and renowned Syria expert and journalist Kristin Helberg.

3

Political Context: Post-Assad Syria

On December 8th, 2024, the Islamist coalition Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) —now officially dissolved— together with other armed opposition groups, brought an end to more than 50 years of Ba'athist rule in Syria by taking Damascus, and forcing President Bashar al-Assad to flee after ruling for more than two decades. The rapid conquest of territories under Assad's authority surprised both Syrians and international observers. The HTS, an offshoot of Al-Qaeda, had been fighting the regime from a de facto autonomous region in northwestern Syria, mainly Idlib, since 2017. Their leader, Ahmad Al-Sharaa, who was declared interim president of Syria in January 2025, inherited a war-torn country beset by profound economic, social, and political challenges.

Syria's reconstruction costs are estimated at USD 216 billion, roughly 10 times the country's annual GDP. The Gross National Income (GNI) per capita in 2024 was USD 830, which is well below the threshold for low-income countries.[1] Extreme poverty now affects one in four Syrians, and two-thirds of the population lives below the poverty line. Most citizens survive on less than one USD per day, and public sector employees generally earn less than USD 100 per month. There has been a sharp rise in housing costs and living expenses since early 2025. The Minister of Public Works and Housing estimates that more than one million homes have been destroyed, with 3-4 million people now living in informal settlements.[2] The World Bank places the damage to residential buildings at over USD 33 billion.[3] Electricity and water shortages persist nationwide.

Destruction is unevenly distributed across the country: while the historic centre and government districts of Damascus remain largely intact, most suburbs are shattered. In contrast, the former HTS-controlled city of Idlib maintains a relatively robust technical infrastructure with minimal physical devastation. In the Kurdish led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) extensive reconstruction—particularly in the once-destroyed city of Kobani— has restored electricity and basic services. Such infrastructural discrepancies influence diverging media landscapes in Syria, as areas with dependable electricity have much better access to TV and internet services.

The war also produced one of the world's largest displacement crises. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), more than 12 million Syrians —over half of the pre-war population— were displaced internally or abroad during the conflict. An estimated 2.8 million people have returned home since Assad's fall, either from abroad or from camps inside Syria. Yet more than 7 million remain displaced inside Syria, and 4.5 million still live abroad.[4] A fresh wave of violence in Suwaida and Syrian coastal cities (mostly Latakia and Tartous) displaced over 430,000 people between December 2024 and July 2025.

[1] Worldbank, 2025, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/07/07/-new-world-bank-report-highlights-syria-s-economic-challenges-and-recovery-prospects-for-2025
[2] The Syrian Observer, 2015, https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/one-million-homes-destroyed-quarter-of-syrians-living-in-informal-settlements-says-housing-minister.html
[3] Worldbank, 2025, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/10/21/syria-s-post-conflict-reconstruction-costs-estimated-at-216-billion
[4] UNCHR, 2025, https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/million-syrians-have-returned-home-more-support-needed-so-millions-more-can

3.1

Post-Assad Political Transformations

On February 12th, 2025, the transitional government announced the creation of a Preparatory Committee for the Syrian National Dialogue Conference, held at the end of the same month, with the mandate of drafting an interim constitution to guide the country through a five-year, post-war transition. President Al-Sharaa ratified the document on March 13th, 2025,[5] and subsequently formed a transitional government. At the same time, the HTS was officially dissolved.

While the declaration of a new constitution was welcomed by many Syrians and parts of the international community, it quickly drew criticism for establishing what critics called a "hyper-presidential" system, which concentrates executive power almost entirely in the presidency and abolishes the position of prime minister.[6] It reaffirmed Islamic law as the principal source of legislation —a continuity from the previous constitution and common in several Arab states— yet also claimed to uphold freedom of expression. The framework envisioned a People's Assembly as an interim parliament responsible for supervising the creation of a permanent constitution. Notably, the president retained the right to appoint one-third of the assembly, as well as all of the judges of the Constitutional Court, without legislative confirmation. Representatives of Syria's ethnic and religious minorities argued that the declaration failed to provide adequate safeguards for minority rights or to introduce meaningful decentralisation mechanisms. Kurdish political and civil organisations were among the most outspoken critics.[7]

The elections to the People's Assembly in October 2025 did little to dispel concerns about the feared concentration of presidential power. Conducted through an indirect electoral system using an electoral college in the absence of political parties, they fell short of the standards common to liberal parliamentary processes.[8] Of the assembly's 210 seats, 140 were assigned through the constituency-based electoral college, with 121 seats contested and 119 filled on election day. Local committees made up of "experts" and community figures selected most members, blurring the distinction between election and appointment.

Elections were postponed in several regions —most notably in Raqqa and Al-Hasakah, both controlled by the Kurdish YPG, and in the Druze-majority Suwaida Governorate— due to "security concerns," according to official statements.

The Syrian Presidency later acknowledged the underrepresentation of women and minorities among the newly elected, pledging to partially address the imbalance through the 70 appointed seats reserved for presidential nominations. At the end of 2025, however, these seats remain vacant.

Despite Western diplomats and representatives from the European Union characterising the vote as a tentative step toward representation, the People's Assembly functions primarily as a consultative body rather than a legislative one. No political parties are currently permitted to operate in Syria.

[5] Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic, 2025, https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025.03.13%20-%20Constitutional%20declaration%20%28English%29.pdf
[6] Human Rights Watch, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/25/syria-constitutional-declaration-risks-endangering-rights
[7] Rojava Information Center, 2025, https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2025/03/iexplainer-syrias-transitional-constitution/
[8] Rusi, 2025, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/syrias-first-post-assad-election-analysis-damascus

3.2

Fault Lines: Societal Fragmentation

Despite a resurgence of Syrian nationalism, controversies surrounding the constitution, elections, and questions of centralisation underscore the tensions presented by profound regional and ethno-sectarian fragmentation, which have deepened since the fall of Assad.

A central question facing the transitional authorities and Syrian society at large is whether this fractured society can be reconfigured sustainably into a coherent political and social order.[9]

The following groups represent key political, social, ethnic, and religious actors shaping Syria's post-Assad society; as we will demonstrate in Chapter 6, they are all involved in disinformation operations in different roles: as sources, targets or disseminators.

1. **Former HTS and its Sunni supporters**
2. **The urban, interconfessional, educated, middle-class**
3. **The Alawites**
4. **The Christians**
5. **The Foloul[10] (former regime remnants)**
6. **The Druze (particularly in Suwaida)**
7. **The Kurds (AANES)**
8. **ISIS members and sympathisers**

- **Former HTS and its Sunni supporters.** Although the HTS has officially dissolved, it exerts influence through an inner circle of trusted men from Idlib who concentrate power through key ministries (Defence, Interior, Foreign Affairs). It can count on the support of most of the Sunnis, who constitute approximately 70 per cent of Syria's population. The Sunni community is not homogeneous and encompasses urban liberal middle classes, Salafis, sympathisers and former fighters associated with different Jihadi movements.

- An urban, interconfessional, and educated **Middle Class**, who aspire to a modern Syria, includes members of all ethnic and religious groups. The regime depends on this large support base. Their education system is rooted in Arab Socialism and has a modernist worldview.

- **Alawites** represent about 10–15 per cent of the population and predominantly live in the coastal mountain regions of Latakia, Tartus, parts of Hama, and the Homs countryside. The Assad family is of Alawite origin, however, contrary to common assumptions, the majority of Alawites did not benefit materially from the former regime and remain relatively poor. The group suffered enormous losses during the war, particularly among young men, many of whom were forcibly conscripted into the army. Estimates indicate that tens of thousands of Alawites were killed whilst fighting for the Syrian Armed Forces and pro-regime militias. Today, the community faces a profound demographic imbalance, marked by a severe shortage of men, numerous war widows, and aging rural populations across many Alawite villages.

- Before 2011, **Christians** in Syria were estimated to comprise around 10 per cent of the total population—approximately two million people. Their numbers have since declined sharply due to mass displacement. Some post-war estimates place the Christian community as low as 2–3 per cent (roughly 300,000 individuals).[11] Christians mainly live in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, as well as in

[9] All data on population groups should be interpreted with caution, as no reliable census is currently available. The figures presented here were compiled from multiple sources and represent averaged estimates. Key references include Minority Rights Gisroup International, Wikipedia, the UNHCR, and the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA).
[10] Arabic: fulūl, literally means "remnants" or "shards"; it is a political term that first gained prominence during the Arab uprisings of 2011 in Egypt to denote residual networks of the Mubarak-regime—particularly ex-officials, security personnel, and allied elites—who remained politically active despite the regime change. In the Syrian context, Foloul refers to individuals and networks tied to the Assad regime's coercive apparatus who continue to wield influence inside Syria or from exile.
[11] EUAA, 2025, https://www.euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-syria/495-christians

surrounding villages. They encompass a variety of denominations, including Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, and several Catholic and Protestant communities.

- Amongst Sunnis, Alawites, and Christians, there are individuals known as **Foloul** —Arabic for remnants of the old regime, including former military officers and members of the various security services responsible for some of Assad's worst atrocities. The Foloul continue to maintain networks within Syria, particularly in the mountainous areas and coastal cities such as Latakia. More significantly, many of them who fled abroad —to the Arab Gulf states, Lebanon, or Russia— are believed to retain influence and engage in political actions from exile.

- Syria also hosts the largest **Druze** population in the region, constituting roughly 3 per cent of the population. They primarily live in the southern suburbs of Damascus and in the Suwaida governorate in the south of Syria. The Druze follow a secretive faith derived from Ismaʿilism, incorporating elements of various religions and Neoplatonic philosophy. Their loyalties lie within their own community and not the state. Even under the Assad regime, the Druze in Syria enjoyed limited autonomy—for instance, during the civil war, Druze leaders negotiated with the Assad regime exemptions from conscription for a substantial number of community members.

- **Kurds** make up roughly 9–11 per cent of the Syrian population, between 2 –2.5 million people. In 2012, they established the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), a de facto autonomous region in the northeast that encompasses much of Syria's oil-producing territory. Yet Kurds do not form a majority within the AANES itself; estimates suggest they number about 1–1.5 million there. Other significant groups in the AANES include Arabs, Assyrians, Syriacs, and Turkmens, jointly numbering between 1.5 and 2.5 million. AANES places roughly one-third of Syrian territory outside of central government control. It is administered instead by the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), a coalition between the leadership of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). SDF with the help of US-troops were crucial to defeat ISIS. The future of the Syrian state depends largely on the outcome of current negotiations concerning the integration of the SDF into the national army and a possible merger of the two administrations. This process will determine whether Syria evolves into a formal federal system.

- **Daesh (ISIS)** cannot really be considered as part of Syrian society, apart from the thousands of family members, sympathisers, and fighters —many of them foreigners— living in camps in Kurdish-controlled areas.[12] ISIS still has cells spread across the whole country and is trying to destabilise it. Syria joined the international coalition to fight the Islamic State in early November 2025, not only for foreign policy strategy: HTS has, for many years, fought ISIS directly and helped the US eliminate its leader. But the group is still very much present. Numerous terror attacks have been prevented, among them alleged assassination attempts against President Al-Sharaa[13]. In the largest attack to date against a Church in June 2025 in Damascus, 22 people were killed.[14] The tactical aims of the Islamic State are clear: to completely destabilise the country through sectarian and ethnic conflict, and to propose itself as the only viable alternative to rule[15].

This list is by no means exhaustive. Bedouin tribes, Turkmens, Shiʿa communities, and their respective armed factions and militias also form part of Syria's complex society, adding further layers to the country's potential fragmentation.

[12] New York Times, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/10/world/middleeast/islamic-state-detention-camps-syria.html
[13] L'Orient Today, 2025, https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1464315/exclusive-sharaa-has-escaped-two-assassination-attempts-in-recent-months.html
[14] Le Monde, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/06/24/syria-little-known-jihadist-group-claims-damascus-church-attack_6742680_4.html
[15] Naji, 2006, https://www.almendron.com/tribuna/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/The-Management-of-Savagery.pdf

3.3

Major Conflicts in 2025

Despite the reassuring rhetoric of the transitional government, mistrust, conflict, and fragmentation deepened throughout 2025. These tensions were exacerbated by disinformation and acts of revenge, eroding an already fragile social cohesion.

Hundreds of revenge killings, largely targeting Alawites, culminated in March 2025 with violent clashes along the Syrian coast. According to estimates, more than 1,400 people were killed, including around 100 women.[16] Former regime supporters —the Foloul— carried out summary executions of transitional government security forces, while men affiliated with the new security apparatus and allied militias indiscriminately killed Alawite men and youths and looted their homes. Disinformation, hate speech and unverified visual material circulated widely during this period, intensifying fear, legitimising acts of revenge, and contributing to the escalation of violence.

The government attempted to respond swiftly by establishing a fact-finding body, the National Inquiry and High-Level Committee to Maintain Civil Peace, pledging to prosecute those responsible. So far, 298 suspects have been identified. Yet fear pervades Alawite communities due to the mediated nature of the pro-government fighters' violence.

The widespread dissemination of videos showing executions and piles of bodies on social media spread fear and reinforced perceptions of impunity. On November 18th, 2025, Syria held its first public trial in Aleppo for fourteen defendants accused of participating in crimes against humanity.[17] Half of the defendants were identified as former Assad loyalists, while the others served in transitional government security forces. Analysts interpret this as an attempt by the government to maintain a delicate balance —seeking to reassure the Alawite community while simultaneously appeasing its Sunni base.

Fear spread among Christian communities following a series of violent incidents, including the burning of a Christmas tree in 2024 in the central square of Al-Suqaylabiyah near Hama by masked militants, the proliferation of revenge graffiti, attacks on alcohol shops and churches, and several alleged kidnappings. The violence heightened on June 22nd, 2025, when a terrorist attack struck the Mar Elias Greek Orthodox Church in the Duwayla district of Damascus during Sunday Mass. The assailant opened fire on worshippers before detonating an explosive vest, killing 22 people and injuring 63. Although there is no evidence of direct involvement by the transitional government's security forces or allied militias, the incident highlighted serious security failures. The group Saraya Ansar al-Sunnah, who are believed to be an offshoot of ISIS, claimed responsibility via Telegram, underscoring the continued threat of Daesh, who pursued a familiar strategy of provoking sectarian violence to create instability and exploiting the ensuing chaos.

The next series of crises that further eroded trust among communities and in the transitional government began in late April 2025. Tensions flared following the circulation of a controversial and unverified audio recording attributed to a Druze cleric, in which he allegedly insulted the Prophet Muhammad. The recording sparked violent clashes between Druze and Sunni groups, involving factions of pro-government forces in the Damascus countryside and the Druze-majority province of Suwaida. According to one report, at least 47 civilians had been killed by April 30th , 2025, shattering long-standing relationships between Druze notables and the central government.[18] Tensions continued into July 2025, when renewed violent confrontations erupted. On July 11th, a Druze vegetable merchant was reportedly kidnapped on the Damascus–Suwaida highway by Bedouin tribesmen, who assaulted him, stole his vehicle, and left him in critical condition. In response, Druze armed groups

[16] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCR), 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session59/a-hrc-59-crp4-en.pdf
[17] France24, 2025, https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20251118-syria-opens-first-public-trial-over-march-massacres-alawite-coastal-region
[18] Friedman & Yahel, 2025, https://dayan.org/contenHowt/syria-druze-and-crisis-Suwaida?utm

detained several Bedouins, triggering a cycle of retaliation. By July 13th, heavy fighting engulfed Suwaida and the surrounding countryside. Bedouin groups established checkpoints in Druze-inhabited areas, Druze militias mobilised, and government positions came under attack. The government eventually deployed troops from the General Security Directorate, but some units — together with rogue elements siding with Bedouin factions, reminiscent of earlier coastal violence— reportedly committed atrocities against civilians. Subsequent Israeli airstrikes, targeting both positions in Suwaida and the Ministry of Defense in Damascus, prompted the withdrawal of government forces. Since then, large parts of Suwaida governorate, including the provincial capital, are autonomous from Damascus with no government security deployed in this area. As one female Druze media professional stated in an interview: “We are not willing to accept security forces from Damascus ever again.”

Fueled by these events, many Kurds started loosing faith in the central government’s willingness to ensure fair political inclusion of minority communities. This is despite encouraging talks between the Kurdish leadership and the transitional government in March 2025, where a meaningful agreement seemed imminent to “re-integrate” the AANES and its armed forces into the Syrian state. Interviewees in October described an atmosphere of fear and isolation, intensified by the proliferation of roadblocks and checkpoints operated by various —mostly Arab— armed groups along routes connecting cities in the AANES with Aleppo and Hama. A widespread sentiment among Kurdish residents is that they should not relinquish control of predominantly Arab areas that currently enjoy a degree of self-governance. As one young Kurdish media professional put it, “Why should we give back what we freed at such a cost of life from ISIS, when nobody in Syria helped?”

Beyond the domestic fault lines, several external actors with often conflicting interests continue to shape developments in Syrian politics —among them Iran, Israel, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and the United States. The ways in which these political conflicts and the re-balancing of power manifest in the Syrian media sphere —particularly through the spread of hate speech and disinformation— will be examined in the following chapters.

4

Media System Structures in Transformation

This chapter explores the legacy of past media structures, recent shifts in media ownership and funding schemes, as well as current provisional media regulation. It analyses how these factors give rise to, and enable the coexistence of, partial and parallel media subsystems that promote competing narratives.

4.1

Syrian Media Before December 8th, 2024

For more than half a century, the Syrian media system was strictly controlled by the Ba'ath Party, successive Assad regimes, members of the Assad family, and other cronies loyal to the regime until its collapse on December 8th, 2024.[19] Although during transition of power from father to son in the late 1990s and early 2000s the media sector saw a pseudo-liberalization in the form of a new entertainment industry[20] the core function of media under the Assad regime was rooted in political indoctrination and regime propaganda. State media under Assad comprised the *Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)*, three terrestrial and five satellite television channels, seven national and several local radio stations, as well as three daily general-interest newspapers.

After protests and uprisings against the regime began in 2011, and as the regime's territorial control gradually diminished during the ensuing civil war, the Syrian media system fragmented into a multitude of smaller subsystems. The regime was able to enforce its media logic of indoctrination in the areas where it retained power, primarily Damascus and some central and coastal regions; Kurdish forces in northeastern Syria established the autonomous region known as AANES, which developed its own media landscape, legally and financially independent from the central government.[21]

During the war, various rebel and opposition groups founded small- and medium-sized media outlets reflecting their political affiliations and geographic control. Some of these were supported by external actors such as the European Union and the United States, whereas others remained local grassroots initiatives.[22] As frontlines shifted, many of these initiatives relocated their headquarters abroad —to Turkey, Lebanon, and subsequently to Germany or France— and became known as "exile media". Nevertheless, many of their contributors continued to work inside Syria as independent journalists, often writing under pseudonyms.

In the later years of the war, as HTS consolidated its control over northwestern Syria around Idlib, another media landscape took shape, involving smaller outlets created by HTS, and larger initiatives financed by Qatar, hosted in neighbouring countries such as Turkey and Lebanon— including the television channel *Syria TV*.

By the time the regime fell on December 8th, 2024, several distinct media structures and journalistic cultures coexisted in parallel. All of them have shaped the current Syrian media system, yet each has already undergone significant transformations in the first year following the collapse of the regime.

[19] Badran, 2021; Rugh, 2004
[20] Salamandra, 2023
[21] Badran, 2021, pp. 24–25
[22] Badran, 2021, p. 24

4.2

The Current Media Landscape(s)

4.2.1 From Assad to HTS: State or Government-Controlled Media

The general structure of state media under the Assad regime has not been dismantled by the new government but has rather been taken over by it. The Ministry of Information (MOI) —a governmental institution often criticised by both Western and local experts as an instrument of media control— continues to operate under the new leadership, and remains responsible for government-controlled media.

Short-term changes implemented by new governing bodies are typical of transitional periods. However, in the medium to long term, the government controlled media and related institutions are expected to undergo substantial reform processes addressing staff, regulation and programming. The current Minister of Information, Hamza Al-Mustafa, stated that "Our goal is to strengthen the discourse of citizenship, build bridges, play a positive role in managing expectations, convey reality accurately, and expand the margin of freedom"[23], hinting at an envisioned transformation from traditional government-controlled media toward more public-service-oriented structures.

The number of government-controlled media outlets active during Assad's regime has been significantly reduced. Currently, the two principal channels of government communication operated by the MOI are the television network *Al-Ikhbariya* and the news agency *SANA*. While *SANA* reportedly continues to function as the government's main voice, MOI officials have indicated that *Al-Ikhbariya* is to be restructured into a public institution dedicated to serving the interests of the population.

SANA resumed operations only a few weeks after the fall of the Assad regime, whereas all state-owned television channels were taken off-air by HTS immediately after December 8th, 2024. *Al-Ikhbariya* returned to broadcasting on May 5th, 2025, from the training studios of the media faculty at the University of Damascus. It currently transmits via the Egyptian Nilesat and the Qatari Es'hail satellites.

Of the three former government-controlled daily newspapers, only *Al-Thawra* remains. It continues to function as the official government newspaper, available in both print and digital editions. Circulation remains extremely limited—the officially reported 10,000 daily copies are rarely available in bookstores or kiosks, even in Damascus. Nevertheless, according to MOI statements, *Al-Thawra* will be transformed into a beacon of quality journalism, press freedom, and pluralism of opinion that explicitly includes political opposition voices.

The government also resumed operations of *Radio Damascus* in January 2025 as a national broadcaster, albeit with comparatively limited resources. Given the overwhelming challenges of managing television and digital media, radio currently receives little strategic attention—a trend reflected in nearly all interviews with journalists, observers, and government officials. Still, several MOI representatives acknowledged radio's potential relevance, particularly considering the amount of time Syrian people spend in cars, where radio could serve as an important source of information and entertainment.

According to the Ministry of Information, approximately 7,000–8,000 individuals are employed within state or government-controlled media institutions, including the ministry itself. Of these, by far the largest share —around 4,000 people— are on the television sector's payroll, even though the number of active TV channels has been reduced to one, *Al-Ikhbariya*. Another 2,000 employees are officially assigned to print media, although only *Al-Thawra* continues to operate, while *SANA* and the radio sector each account for roughly 500–600 employees.

[23] SANA, 2025, https://archive.sana.sy/en/?p=354650

The legacy of over-employment in state media is widely acknowledged as a structural problem. However, the MOI currently avoids large-scale layoffs, as such measures could aggravate poverty and social instability. Moreover, the government continues to rely on the expertise of long-serving staff members during this fragile transition period. Consequently, only about 230 employees have been dismissed from state media since the regime change—primarily those in senior positions or, as one MOI interviewee phrased it, "those actively involved in promoting bloodshed." Involvement in corruption was cited as another reason for dismissal.

The MOI states that approximately 70 per cent of state-media employees are Alawites, who are often regarded as particularly loyal to the Assad regime. However, a history of working for state media before December 8th, 2024, does not necessarily imply support of the regime. In a January 2025 *Guardian* report, former state television employee and news anchor Hussam Hijazi, who publicly announced the fall of the Assad regime, described this as "the proudest moment of his career"[24]. Like Hijazi, several interviewees in our sample echoed that report by stating that they had long opposed the Assad regime but were previously too afraid to speak out.

Currently, state media employ a mix of former regime personnel, new recruits from Idlib and Aleppo, and returning journalists from exile. The new power structures are clearly visible: affiliates of the former HTS rulers from Idlib have typically been appointed to executive positions within the MOI and state media. Salaries for the new executives are significantly higher than those of long-serving employees to ensure loyalty among executive staff and to reward those who contributed to the regime's overthrow. At the same time, the unequal payment structure has been perceived by many older employees as a direct affront, prompting numerous resignations.

A challenge for state-owned media seeking transition towards a publicly representative media culture for all Syrians will be to overcome one-sided coverage that favors one community over another. A high-ranking MOI official emphasized that in Syria, "there are many nations within one nation," whose differing views and interests should be reflected in genuinely pluralistic public channels. Yet this transition remains fraught with obstacles. Presenting divergent opinions in state media is often perceived as an affront by both pro-government circles and minority communities. For example, during our field visit, Druze interviewees from Suwaida criticised *Al-Ikhbariya* for allowing guests and moderators to engage in racist rhetoric toward the Druze community. They described the channel's coverage as excessively aligned with government forces and overtly hostile to Druze groups. Many also objected to the channel's recurring use of the term "mistake" in reference to atrocities committed against Druze civilians, arguing that "violations" would have been a more accurate and appropriate term. Several interviewees identified the government and official state media as primary sources of hate speech and disinformation. Officials at the MOI acknowledged bias, but contended that expressions of empathy toward the Druze community in past programmes had provoked public outrage against *Al-Ikhbariya*—both from audiences and within the MOI itself. In other words, broadcasting government-critical perspectives on "their own channels" was perceived as a provocation by pro-government loyalists.

Nonetheless, interviewees mentioned some examples of more inclusive programming. On May 5th, 2025, *Al-Ikhbariya* launched live broadcasting with a televised debate that featured a prominent Druze religious leader—signaling an effort toward balance and inclusivity.[25]

[24] The Guardian, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/20/syria-sana-state-news-agency-media-new-era
[25] Atlantic Council, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/sectarianism-social-media-and-syrias-information-blackhole/

Another example cited was an episode of a talk show, in which human rights activists from Druze communities discussed conditions in Suwaida alongside government representatives, giving voice to both sides of the conflict. According to MOI officials, the show elicited significant backlash on social media from alleged government supporters who condemned the ministry for permitting such pluralistic debate.

4.2.2 The New Transnational Arab Dimension: Qatar-Financed Media

When HTS operated an autonomous government in the Idlib area, it ran its own mass media outlets, including the now-defunct *Ebaa* News Agency, established in 2017.[26] During this period, close political and media relations developed between HTS and Qatar, a major actor in the media landscape of the MENA region. As a legacy of this cooperation, several influential media outlets funded by Qatar currently operate in Syria. Their political agendas often align with those of the new Syrian authorities and former HTS affiliates. These Qatari-funded outlets should not, however, be understood as direct mouthpieces of the Syrian government. They are financed exclusively through Qatari sources and primarily reflect Qatari interests. Observations suggest that as long as the new Syrian government remains dependent on foreign funding, its political alignment with Qatar —one of its most significant external patrons— will likely persist, positioning Qatari-funded media in a privileged role within Syria's emerging media ecosystem.

Due to its relatively professional standards and the lack of strong domestic alternatives, *Syria TV* has become one of the most popular television channels in the country. Launched in Istanbul in March 2018, it brought together numerous Syrian opposition figures in exile. Turkey in general served as a safe haven for Syrian opposition groups, providing the political flexibility and logistical support required for externally funded media production.[27] The channel's ten million Facebook followers reflect its significant popularity among Syrian audiences. Both the current Minister of Information, Hamza Al-Mustafa, and his deputy, Abdallah Moussa, previously held senior positions at *Syria TV*. Following the fall of the Assad regime, the channel established offices within Syria.

Other noteworthy media outlets financed by Qatari entities include *Al-Araby TV* and *Al-Modon* newspaper. While both are conceived as pan-Arab media organisations, they maintain a strong editorial focus on Syrian affairs and employ correspondents inside the country. All these outlets operate under the umbrella of the *Fadaat Media Group*, founded in Qatar in 2012, which is strongly influenced by the Palestinian intellectual Azmi Bishara. Fadaat is said to represent an Arab nationalist and secular perspective compared to the Qatari-funded *Al Jazeera Media Network.*

Journalists working for *Fadaat* outlets in Syria report that editorial guidelines from headquarters explicitly prohibit taking sides or being perceived as aligned with the Syrian government, emphasizing a neutral and inclusive public stance. A Druze journalist in exile explained that he seeks to publish his articles in *Al-Modon* or other *Fadaat*-affiliated media in order to reach the widest possible Syrian audience, even though he remains mindful of Qatari interests. He added that *Fadaat* media allow for the expression of diverse viewpoints, including those critical of the Syrian government. At the same time, likely due to the new government's ongoing reliance on Qatari support, journalists affiliated with *Fadaat* outlets enjoy privileged access to official sources and benefit from advanced technical infrastructure, much of it shared with *Al Jazeera* and *Syria TV*. Journalists noted that direct criticism geared towards the new government

[26] Barnard & Winter, 2023
[27] Mermier, 2023

is relatively rare in the domestic coverage on these channels.

The *Al Jazeera* network is further expanding its involvement through a social media-based channel, *Syria Now (Suria al-Aan)*, which distributes content across YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and X. Additionally, journalism trainers from *Al Jazeera* and the *Al Jazeera Media Institute* currently provide some of the most important capacity-building programmes within Syrian government media institutions, including *Al-Ikhbariya*.

4.2.3 Between Return and Fundraising: Former Exile Media

Since 2012, a major component of the Syrian media landscape has consisted of outlets founded by civil society actors, activists, and opponents of the Assad regime. Many began operating in temporarily "liberated" areas of Syria but were later forced into exile as conditions deteriorated. Their founders and core teams frequently relocated their headquarters abroad—most commonly to Turkey.[28] Others moved on to, or established branches within, European Union countries such as Germany or France, where they received the majority of their funding. Positioning themselves in explicit contrast to both Assad-affiliated and radical Islamist media outlets that operated during the war, these exiled organisations framed themselves as "independent public interest" media, emphasizing editorial autonomy despite their financial dependence on Western donors.

Typically, these outlets are digital-only and integrate text, audio, and video reporting. The three most prominent examples are *Al-Jumhuriya, Enab Baladi*, and *Rozana*.

- **Al-Jumhuriya** is an online journalistic platform founded by Syrian journalists and writers in early 2012 to provide in-depth reporting and analysis on Syrian politics. For revenue it draws on a combination of grants from international organisations, such as the Open Society Foundations, and provision of services.[29]

- **Enab Baladi** originated in 2011 as a small grassroots initiative in the town of Darayya in southern Syria.[30] It has since grown into a major news website with a weekly print edition and a full-time staff of around 45 people headquartered in Istanbul.[31]

- **Rozana** was founded in France in 2013 as an online radio station and website.[32] Supported by various European and US donors, it operated from France and southern Turkey, relying on approximately 200 freelancers across Syria.

These outlets developed extensive translocal networks, combining critical and investigative reporting from journalists both inside and outside of Syria. For many reporters who remained in the country under the Assad regime, these networks provided a vital opportunity to share insights and critical perspectives with Syrian and diaspora audiences through digital channels—often under pseudonyms for reasons of safety.

Most of these outlets had relied on European or US-based funding, as they represented counter-models to Assad-controlled media by upholding journalistic ethics and providing access to verified information. Following the fall of the Assad regime, however, they must now redefine their *raison d'être* in a way that both resonates with their donors and domestic audiences. One strategic avenue is to position themselves as champions of quality journalism and as a counterforce to disinformation—a narrative captured in their joint statement of December 16th, 2024:

[28] Mermier, 2023
[29] Al-Jumhuriya, https://aljumhuriya.net/ar/
[30] Enab Baladi, https://www.enabbaladi.net/
[31] Badran & Smets, 2021
[32] Rozana, https://www.rozana.fm/

"Over the past 13 years, this sector has evolved by providing individuals with the skills and competencies necessary to make the transition from citizen narrators to professional journalists."[33] Moreover, these media actors have positioned themselves as advocates for a democratic media order—calling for the abolition of the Ministry of Information and what they consider as a state-media monopoly, the introduction of license-free media registration, an independent regulatory authority, and a legal framework ensuring freedom of information and expression.[34]

Yet, the shutdown of USAID in July 2025 led to the complete withdrawal of US funding for media, intensifying competition for limited European resources, which were already concentrated among a few large outlets. A major obstacle for most of these organisations is the lack of reliable structural or core funding that would allow for long-term planning. Donor preferences have shifted toward funding short-term training programmes for individual journalists, leaving established media outlets marginalised in their efforts to consolidate operations inside Syria.[35]

However, there are also positive signs on the horizon: the French Foreign Ministry has recently confirmed a grant of EUR 1.5 million for a collective, consisting of *ARTA, Rozana, Enab Baladi*, and *Jumhuriya*. Also, International Media Support (IMS) and Free Press Unlimited (FPU) are offering small grants to independent and public interest media, some of it provided by the European Union.

Simultaneously, some of these outlets report that their externally acquired, balanced approach to journalism is not always well-received by audiences within Syria. In a context of growing ethno-sectarian polarisation, they are frequently accused of bias by opposing factions, often resulting in a flood of hate speech across their digital channels.[36] [37] One journalist from a re-establishing exile outlet noted that the team carefully calibrates its terminology on sectarian issues and strives to avoid language that could reinforce sectarian divisions.

4.2.4 Soul-Searching: Private and Small Local Media

Several privately owned media outlets —particularly radio stations— survive as remnants of the Assad era, including *Sham FM, Madina FM, Radio Farah*, and *Radio Arabesque*. Under Assad, "private" media was largely an euphemism for ownership by regime cronies or members of the Assad family, such as Bashar al-Assad's cousin Rami Makhlouf.[38] While pseudo-private television stations such as *Sama TV* have been completely dismantled, some radio stations remain. Reportedly, owners of formerly pro-Assad outlets such as *Sham FM* and *Al-Watan* fled the country to unknown destinations, leaving the stations under HTS control immediately following the collapse of the Assad regime.

Unlike the postwar media booms seen in Libya after the fall of Qaddafi in 2012[39] or in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 —where hundreds of new private media outlets emerged amid rapid deregulation— Syria has not witnessed such proliferation of new media in 2025.

[33] Al-Jumhuriya, 2024, https://aljumhuriya.net/en/2024/12/16/statement-on-press-freedom-in-post-assad-syria/
[34] ibid.
[35] Badran, 2023
[36] Syria Panel I during the International Journalism Festival in Perugia 2025 https://www.journalismfestival.com/programme/2025/preserving-truth-the-role-of-journalism-in-syrias-past-and-future
[37] Syria Panel II during the International Journalism Festival in Perugia 2025 https://www.journalismfestival.com/programme/2025/a-new-season-for-journalism-in-syria#:~:text=Lina%20al%20Hafez,board%20member%20Al%2DJumhuriya%20Collective
[38] Badran, 2021
[39] Wollenberg & Pack, 2013

This is partly due to the abundance of social media channels available in Syria, but more significantly due to the absence of investments for new media ventures, a general climate of revenge-seeking in which impartial reporting is often not valued, and the MOI's current reluctance to grant licenses to independent or public interest media. As a result, Syria's independent media sector remains scattered and fragile, consisting mainly of small, locally based, platform-driven outlets that operate with very limited resources across various parts of the country.

Some of these focus on thematic coverage, such as peacebuilding and social cohesion (e.g. *Sawt Suri*[40]), or environmental and climate issues (e.g. *Lahlah*[41]). Others serve specific communities or regions, covering social developments, local events, and everyday life. Examples include *Focus Aleppo*[42] and *Radio Nasaeem* (for Aleppo and Idlib), *Radio Fresh* (Idlib and surrounding areas), and *Tahaqqaq* (Suwaida), *The Eighth Gate*[43] (Damascus), and *Snack Syria*[44] (Damascus). Small local media with public interest profiles are more prevalent in the north, northeast, and Damascus than in coastal areas (Latakia and Tartous) and in the east (Hasaka and Deir Ezzor), where they remain scarce or absent.

Within the current environment of Damascus-centred politics, representatives of small local media say they play an essential role in offering minorities and citizens across Syria opportunities to voice grievances and participate in public discourse. Owing to their local knowledge and access, such outlets can investigate region-specific issues, such as the closure of refugee camps around Aleppo, the recruitment of orphans by militias in northeast Syria, or the restitution of housing, land, and property to returning refugees in Idlib. Many of these small local media also feature community-oriented, service-based, and human-interest stories presented in an accessible style that blends simple journalism with light social commentary.

Beyond community media, an increasing number of privately run news platforms publish professional, daily journalism without overt cultural or political alignment—for example, *Syria Direct*[45], *Syria 24*[46], the *North Press Agency*[47], and the *Syrian Press Agency*[48].

More recently, explicitly government-critical platforms have begun to emerge. The social media platform *Shar3a*[49] best exemplifies this growing segment of the media landscape addressing serious political and social issues predominantly through satire. Combining sharp humour and strong visual storytelling, much of its content takes a critical stance toward governmental policies and figures.

All the platforms mentioned above rely primarily on Facebook for publishing and audience engagement. Their websites serve as secondary dissemination channels, while Instagram and X are used optionally by most outlets to expand their reach.

As funding is scarce, private and former exile media struggle to retain their staff. Interviews revealed that many well-trained journalists and promising young content creators are recruited by other outlets, including government-controlled state and social media channels and internationally funded media organisations, such as those backed by Qatar. This talent migration has created a severe "brain drain," with grassroots and local media unable to compete financially with the higher salaries offered elsewhere.

[40] Sawt Suri, http://www.sot-sy.com
[41] Lahlah https://lahlah.space
[42] Focus Aleppo https://focusaleppo.com
[43] The Eighth Gate, fb.com/the8th.gate
[44] Snack Syria, https://snacksyrian.com/
[45] Syria Direct, https://syriadirect.org
[46] Syria 24, https://www.syria-24.com/
[47] North Press Agency, https://npasyria.com/en/
[48] Syrian Press Agency, https://syrianpressagency.com
[49] Shar3a, https://www.facebook.com/Share3Media/

By late 2025, as Qatari-funded and government-controlled outlets consolidate their structures and programming, it is likely that the MOI will begin issuing additional licenses to private media organisations. At the same time, UN-affiliated and European entities are preparing to launch initial rounds of targeted media-support programmes. The intersection of new funding opportunities and legal reforms could accelerate Syria's transition toward a more pluralistic media landscape—simultaneously serving as a test of the new rulers' tolerance and inclusivity.

4.2.5 Separate from Syria? Kurdish Media[50]

Since 2012, the predominantly Kurdish northeastern region of Syria, AANES, has gradually consolidated political autonomy. In 2015, Kurdish authorities led by the dominant Democratic Union Party (PYD) adopted an Information Law that established a Higher Council for Media, tasked with regulating the media sector. Members of this council are elected by media professionals active in the AANES.[51]

The cities of Qamishli, al-Hasakah, Raqqa, and Amuda remain key centres of media activity in the region. An internal MiCT report from 2019 documented a comparatively high concentration of media outlets operating in these areas. At that time, roughly half of the identified outlets were operated or financed by regional Kurdish authorities or political parties. These included three television channels —such as *Ronahi TV*[52]— alongside eleven radio stations, and seven news websites, illustrating the importance of developing media infrastructure for the autonomous administration. Most outlets broadcast in both Kurdish and Arabic, with Kurdish being the dominant language of communication. The other half of AANES's media landscape consisted of smaller independent radio stations, local newspapers, websites, or exile-based outlets—often funded by European and US donors. These were typically more short-lived compared to their government-funded counterparts.[53] Because many Kurdish media organisations relied heavily on US funding until early 2025, the dismantling of USAID and the resulting termination of US-American financial support had a particularly devastating effect. Several outlets were forced to suspend operations entirely, while others continued to function without adequate resources, leading to a marked downsizing of the region's private media sector.

One notable exception is *ARTA*[54], founded in 2013 and widely regarded as the success story of Rojava's independent media sector. *ARTA* maintains offices in northeast Syria, Iraqi Kurdistan, Damascus and Germany, and has consistently secured European and US funding to sustain and expand its operations. Also, the *North Press Agency*[55] was mentioned by many interviewees as a reliable source of information, since it covers Syria-wide events from the AANES perspective.

Technically, the media landscape in the AANES has changed little since the new government assumed power in Damascus. Private media licenses issued by Kurdish authorities remain valid within Kurdish territories and continue to be renewed annually through a semi-automated process involving payment of a licensing fee. Oversight of media operations is still exercised by the Higher Council for Media, and Kurdish law continues to apply.

In 2025, numerous Kurdish media outlets applied for national licensing through the Ministry of Information in Damascus. Some even established liaison offices in the capital in an effort to develop working relationships with central authorities.

[50] For this chapter, the authors drew on an internal MiCT media mapping from January 2019 conducted in the predominantly Kurdish region of northeastern Syria (AANES)
[51] Badran, 2021, p. 27
[52] Ronahi TV, https://ronahi.tv/
[53] Badran, 2021
[54] ARTA, https://www.artaorg.net/
[55] North Press Agency https://npasyria.com/en/

None of these applications, however, has been approved to date. Kurdish interviewees reported discrimination against Kurdish media and journalists, describing restricted access to official information, delays in permit processing, and poor responsiveness from governmental institutions in Damascus. Unlike in the rest of Syria, media coverage in Kurdish-administered areas regarding the new national government is largely negative and openly critical.

4.2.6 The New Opinion Leaders: Social Media

While traditional mass media channels can be monitored with relative ease, and smaller journalistic websites can still be mapped, social media platforms represent a far more complex and diffuse communication sphere. Systematic observation is difficult, if not impossible, across multiple channels containing user-generated content.

Government-affiliated, private, and exile media all operate their own social media channels. In addition, numerous independent users, activists, and informal networks engage in media production and debate online, representing a wide ideological range, from staunch government supporters to outspoken critics, spanning geographies from rural Syria to international platforms.

Internet access in Syria remains overwhelmingly mobile-based. As of early 2025, an estimated 77 per cent of Syrians had access to a mobile phone.[56] Aggregated data from 2024 indicated that approximately 35 per cent of the population had internet access, though this figure is likely to have risen significantly following the new government's campaign to expand connectivity during 2025. Verification of current figures remains difficult, given the rapid proliferation of mobile networks and inconsistent data collection mechanisms.

Across all interviews conducted for this study, respondents consistently identified Facebook as the dominant social media platform in Syria, and the platform accounts for an estimated 84.1 per cent of Syrian social media traffic.[57] Other platforms, including YouTube, Instagram, and X, follow with far smaller user bases.

Instant messaging applications —particularly WhatsApp and Telegram— are among the most frequently used digital tools. Beyond their function as private voice or text messaging services, their "channel" and "broadcast" features have evolved into significant instruments for one-to-many communication. Both platforms are now widely employed by political actors, influencers, and community organisers. In many towns, villages, and specific social groups, WhatsApp channels and groups have become primary vehicles for information circulation, discussion, and mobilisation. Many Syrians we spoke to consider them as social networks.

Meanwhile, linear television consumption has declined dramatically, driven in large part by persistent electricity shortages. Interviewees noted that whenever electricity is available, people prioritise charging mobile devices and power banks to ensure continued access to digital communication—even during power outages. This adaptive pattern underscores the centrality of mobile digital media to the contemporary Syrian information environment.

[56] DataReportal, 2025, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-syria
[57] StatCounter, 2025, https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/syrian-arab-republic

5

Media Policy and Its Impact on Journalistic Work

Article 13 of the interim constitution from March 13th, 2025, contains a reference to media freedom, stating that "The State guarantees freedom of opinion, expression, information, publication, and the press." However, critics have pointed out that Article 23 simultaneously provides grounds for restricting these freedoms if expression is deemed to harm "public order," "national unity," or "public morality".[58] How these potentially contradictory principles will be interpreted and applied remains a matter of debate.

The following section discusses the institutions tasked with implementing media policy, the transitional government's current regulatory approach, and the ways in which journalists navigate emerging legal and institutional frameworks.

[58] Henriksen, 2025

5.1

The Ministry of Information and Media Policy

Before joining the government in Damascus in March 2025, the current Minister of Information, Hamza Al-Mustafa, served as the general manager of *Syria TV*, one of the prominent former opposition outlets under the Qatari Fadaat Media Group. One of his deputies, Abdallah Mousa, also previously held a senior position at *Syria TV* before the regime change. At the time of writing the Ministry of Information and Media Policy (MOI) employed around 400 staff.

During meetings with high-ranking officials of the MOI they emphasised liberal values and recognised press freedom as a guiding principle in the formulation of future media policy. In the same spirit, during a public interview at the Global Media Forum in Bonn in mid-July 2025,[59] Minister Al-Mustafa outlined his vision for the future of Syria's media landscape —including state-owned media— stating that it should be rooted in the values of "dialogue, pluralism, and inclusivity."

The minister identified the drafting of a national code of ethics for the media as one of the ministry's key initiatives to promote freedom of expression and ensure the protection of journalists. This drafting process, conducted in close collaboration with the re-established Syrian Journalists Union (SJU), is designed as a bottom-up effort emphasizing participation by local journalists and national media outlets (see chapter 5.3. for SJU). During our field research, several interlocutors cited this initiative as a tangible sign of the new government's stated commitment to strengthening the role of independent media in Syria.

5.2

Licensing Media Outlets

In the absence of an independent regulatory authority, the MOI currently holds responsibility for granting licenses to all non-governmental media outlets. All forms of mass media —television, radio, print, and journalistic websites— are legally required to obtain a license. MOI officials state that they welcome all applications and will not reject any submission that meets the formal criteria, which differ between media types.

For broadcasting outlets, the key conditions include a minimum fee of USD 10,000 for radio stations, maintaining an office space of at least 400 square meters, submitting the names of all employees, and demonstrating access to a functional antenna or licensed broadcasting infrastructure. According to MOI representatives, eligible applicants first receive preliminary authorisation to begin operations. Following a three-month probation period and a site inspection, full licenses are granted if all conditions have been met. As of September 2025, the MOI reported receiving 480 license applications.

However, government critical interlocutors argue that the application process and its requirements vary significantly. Media outlets with close ties to the authorities —or those financed by Qatar, including *Al Jazeera* and *Syria TV*— are said to face few procedural obstacles. By contrast, independent or critical outlets often encounter multiple rounds of inquiries and shifting requirements.

As of December 2025, all media outlets that returned from exile and applied for licences in early 2025 —*Enab Baladi*, *Rozana*, and *Al-Jumhuriya*— had received approval to operate their online platforms from within Syria. To the authors' knowledge, licences to broadcast from inside Syria have not yet been issued to any outlets from this group.

[59] DW Global Media Forum, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWsi4k9KUPA

5.3

The Role of Journalists' Unions

On February 6th, 2025, the official Journalists Union (SJU) was dissolved on government orders and subsequently re-established in May 2025. All members had to update their membership data, leading to the exclusion of former government employees and individuals who held membership for reasons that did not involve media work. As of September 2025 the SJU has approximately 1,700 members, with a further 2,000 applications awaiting review.

The SJU holds the authority to issue press cards to its members.[60] Compared to the pre-2024 period, the definition of who qualifies as a journalist has been simplified, and a university degree is no longer required to join the union. Applicants need to prove that they are working journalists in Syria by providing samples of their journalistic work. . The union's Secretary of Public Relations and Administrative Affairs, Baraa Osman, emphasised that SJU is a member of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and seeks international cooperation.

Parallel to the SJU, a second organisation —the Syrian Journalists Association (SJA)— was established in 2013 in exile by journalists opposing the regime's manipulation of the SJU, particularly during the early years of the Syrian uprisings. In its founding statement, the SJA accused the SJU of supporting "the regime's repression of peaceful demonstrations since their inception (...) in addition to [its] wilful neglect of all the humiliation, torture, arrest, and repression that journalists have been subjected to in more than two hundred documented cases"[61]. The SJA is supported by the international organisation Free Press Unlimited (FPU) and is also recognised by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) as the official representative body of Syrian journalists. Discussions are currently underway about a potential merger between the two, which would serve as a litmus test for the future of journalist self-governance and professional unity in post-Assad Syria.

Interviewees highlighted several concerns regarding the new leadership and the union's government relations. A key issue is the reported government selection of local SJU branch head staff, which should be filled through elections between union members to ensure legitimacy and independent representation. Another concern is related to the drafting of a code of conduct for media and journalists by SJU under the supervision of the MOI. Considering comparable experiences in neighbouring countries, experts point to the risk that this code could be used by the government to exert control over media in the absence of any self-regulation mechanisms or independent regulation authorities.

[60] Information about the SJU was partly provided by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)
[61] SJA, 2013, https://syja.org/founding-statement?lang=en

5.4

Working Conditions for Journalists

Although the new Syrian Journalists Union issues press cards to its members, additional permits are required for interviews with government officials or for reporting from classified locations such as Latakia, Aleppo, Suwaida, or Homs. The Ministry of Information is currently responsible for granting these permissions. Each governorate appears to require a separate permit, which significantly restricts journalistic mobility and nationwide reporting. These permissions are especially critical for the production and dissemination of visual materials.

Some journalists ignore these bureaucratic requirements, while others criticise the process as unnecessarily cumbersome and politically motivated. Officially justified as a "safety protection" measure, the system frequently hampers timely access to events and sources. Critics argue that it serves to privilege journalists from government-aligned media and to disadvantage others, particularly those from Alawite or Druze backgrounds. For example, journalist Rula Asad, who is of Alawite origin, reported discrimination when attempting to secure accreditation from the MOI. In a report for the organisation International Media Support (IMS), she wrote:

"The fact that I am Alawite, the same minority as the former ruling family, and share the last name 'Assad' with the dictator —despite having no relation to him— was deemed sufficient grounds for sectarian scrutiny and discrimination. While other journalists and influencers received two-week permits, my three-day limit was imposed due to my background and my intention to report from the coastal region, where the Alawite majority resides and has faced acts of revenge underreported by the media."[62]

Conversely, independent journalists may also face discrimination when their applications are handled by ministry staff who previously served under the Assad regime. A media expert interviewed for this research suggested that old loyalties still shape administrative behaviour in subtle but consequential ways.

In general, journalists perceive the government as an institution that refrains from proactive communication. This appears paradoxical given the widespread circulation of personal WhatsApp numbers of both high- and mid-ranking officials, including ministers. Interviews suggest that many officials avoid direct engagement with journalists out of fear that their statements or decisions could be presented in a misleading context, resulting in personal or political repercussions.[63]

Possession of a press card or permit from the MOI does not guarantee safety, as numerous non-governmental armed groups continue to operate across Syria. These militias do not consistently recognise documentation issued by the central government. An investigative report by Mnemonics recorded 24 armed factions involved in violent attacks against members of the Alawite minority in Latakia in March 2025, noting that only a fraction appeared to have acted under official military command.[64] The Ministry of Interior and the army thus seem to exercise limited control over security operations, even in Damascus.

As of September 2025, the MOI reported 28 cases in which journalists had clashed with local security forces or other branches of the government and required ministry intervention as a result. One official cited the case of journalist Nour Souliman, who was arrested in Damascus by security forces without a warrant or due process for allegedly posting "very aggressive" pro-Alawite messages on social media during the coastal-region violence in March 2025. When the MOI ordered her release, the decision triggered a wave of public backlash from pro-government supporters, who considered her posts as hate speech and incitement to violence.

[62] IMS, 2025, https://www.mediasupport.org/blogpost/ignored-voices-women-and-the-media-in-syrias-new-era/
[63] Atlantic Council, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/sectarianism-social-media-and-syrias-information-blackhole/
[64] Syrian Archive, 2025, https://cms.syrianarchive.org/uploads/Factions_Mobilization_Report_Final_En_080725_8ce101f0ea.pdf

While official policies on press permissions do not differ across regions, the application of these rules varies widely. Due to Syria's recent fragmentation, demographic diversity, and the government's limited control over some territories, local conditions significantly shape journalists' experiences. In regions such as Homs and the coastal governorates, armed forces affiliated with former HTS factions tend to act more harshly than in Damascus. The relationship between journalists and political authorities also differs by region. In Idlib and other parts of northwestern Syria, journalists have had more time to adapt to local power structures and now face fewer obstacles than their colleagues elsewhere. Conversely, several regions —including parts of Homs, Deir Ezzor, Quneitra, and certain coastal cities— continue to lack substantive media presence altogether. This absence limits coverage and prevents journalists from developing working relationships with local authorities, many of whom are unfamiliar with professional journalistic practices. Finally, the Kurdish-administered AANES continues to operate as a distinct information ecosystem, governed by its own regulations and media practices.

5.5

Sensitive Topics and Consequences for Journalists

Media freedom also becomes evident in how a regime handles sensitive issues raised by journalists. When asked about the most important topics in the Syrian media today, interviewees most frequently mentioned the economy and transitional justice.

While coverage of poverty and public services is seen as urgent and socially significant, these themes are not considered politically sensitive. Interviewees noted that the media can freely critique shortcomings in public services and hold the government accountable for its failure to improve infrastructure or administrative performance. This relative tolerance for criticism may be partly owed to sanctions and their extremely negative impact on socio-economic progress. State officials regard the lifting of sanctions as a precondition for removing barriers to economic growth and recovery.

In contrast, transitional justice is perceived as a highly sensitive issue, and as such subject to close monitoring by the Ministry of Information. Numerous non-governmental organisations and media outlets —such as *Sawt Suri*, *Mnemonics*, the *Association of Detainees and Missing Persons in Saydnaya Prison*, and *Badael*— investigate and report on transitional justice, particularly the cases of missing persons and atrocities committed over the past fifteen years by both the Assad regime and non-state armed groups. The latter include Islamist movements that emerged and expanded in Syria, such as HTS, and the Al-Nusra Front, which at various times maintained differing degrees of association with leading figures in the new government.

The new authorities show ambivalence toward inquiries regarding missing people: they are reluctant to provide information, documents, or permissions, and rarely extend institutional support to journalists investigating these matters. Interviewees described the government's attitude as generally non-cooperative toward journalists working on this topic. Criticism includes the National Commission for Transitional Justice (NCTJ) and the National Commission for the Missing (NCM). However, some journalists acknowledge that details on current investigations cannot be revealed in order to protect the privacy of individuals and prevent acts of revenge or premature public condemnations.

Interviewees also identified several other issues that remain difficult to address:

- The situation of refugees in camps around Idlib and Aleppo. The government encourages residents to return home, aiming to close the camps and withdraw their services. However, many former refugees find their homes destroyed or occupied by militias upon return.
- The continued tenure of some officials who served under the Assad regime and remained in office despite credible evidence of corruption. Interviewees suggested that the new government may have made political deals with these individuals.
- The gradual emergence of new networks and practices of clientelism among the ruling elites.
- Critical reporting on recent violent events in Suwaida, Sahnaya, and along the coast. Such coverage is largely avoided, except by local social media content creators in Suwaida, where state security forces are currently absent.

It is important to mention that currently there is no official ban on any of these topics. Reluctance to cover is mostly fueled by insecurity and a lack of legal framework. When asked about the consequences of addressing such sensitive topics, interviewees explained that they expect indirect restrictions rather than overt repression. These measures may include ignoring journalists' information requests, excluding them from press conferences, and withholding access to official communication channels. For the moment, government strategies for controlling public discourse rarely involve the repressive tactics familiar from previous or other authoritarian regimes — such as detentions, assassinations, threats, kidnappings, office raids, or media closures— although some armed groups occasionally undermine these official strategies.

5.6

Journalism Training and Education

The changing media environment has created new demands for professional skills among journalists and media practitioners. Journalism and media education in Syria can broadly be divided into three levels: (1) vocational learning on the job, (2) professional training courses, and (3) academic education.

Most journalists currently working in Syrian media have acquired their skills informally, through direct experience rather than formal training. This holds true for employees in former regime-affiliated outlets as well as for those working in Gulf-funded, exile, or local media. One interviewee explained, "I was a fighter for the Free Syrian Army in Aleppo, then spent six months in Idlib [with HTS], and later went to Turkey to work with *Syria TV*." Many of these journalists have developed a considerable degree of practical expertise, but their career prospects depend largely on their political orientation and social networks within the current media landscape.

Several international media support organisations have introduced training programmes for aspiring journalists and content creators in the past 12 months. Two key approaches dominate this field:

1. Countering disinformation: Media support organisations such as Arij, DWA, and MiCT conduct workshops and provide tools to help Syrian media confront the pervasive challenge of disinformation. These programmes typically introduce software-based verification and open-source intelligence tools (OSINT), methods for analysing different types of disinformation, and knowledge about sources and dissemination strategies. They also emphasize journalistic ethics as a countermeasure to propaganda and misinformation.

2. Fostering cross-regional dialogue: Initiatives by organisations such as Amal, Arij, MiCT and others combine journalism training with dialogue and collaborative production. Journalists from various regions and ethno-sectarian communities participate, aiming not only to strengthen professional skills but also to promote interaction, mutual understanding, and social cohesion.

The new government has recognised the lack of professionalisation in the media sector. In response, it established the government-affiliated Syrian Academy for Training and Consulting. Founded in 2018 under HTS control in Idlib, the academy was tasked with institutionalising and professionalising media work in a region where, according to a representative, "no journalism was existent." After the fall of the Assad regime, the academy expanded to 69 employees and opened a branch in Damascus, where it currently provides media training for government representatives. Courses reportedly include strategies for addressing and countering hate speech. In the future, the academy intends to extend its activities to journalists working in government-affiliated media, though adapting to the established institutional structures in Damascus presents significant challenges. For now, the focus remains on government cadres. Trainers are said to come primarily from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab countries.

Finally, the Faculty of Media at the University of Damascus offers the only PhD and Master's programming in communication and journalism in Syria. In addition, it currently enrolls around 1,700 Bachelor's students, with 300 new entrants in 2025. Following the political transition, faculty leadership was replaced by government-loyal academics, while only a small number of staff members identified as explicit Assad supporters were dismissed. Faculty members expressed a desire to promote an inclusive and constructive pedagogical approach, emphasizing that all political opinions should remain outside the classroom to prevent sectarian division. A prevalent theme among student graduation projects is the critical evaluation of the Assad regime—an area that appears to carry no major political controversy. Faculty members pointed out, that the university's television studios were used by *Al-Ikhbariya*, thereby depriving students of essential facilities for practical training in television production.

6

A Major Challenge: Disinformation and Hate Speech

Syria has long been a hotbed of propaganda, disinformation, and hate speech, both before and after regime change, but these phenomena have increased considerably in the current transition period. In March 2025, Ahmad Primo, the director of *Taakad* (Verify-Sy), one of the major Syrian fact-checking platforms established in 2016, noted that while the platform has monitored many major events at the Syrian, Arab, and international levels since its founding, his team has never witnessed a flood of misleading news comparable to the present situation.[65]

[65] Al Jazeera Media Institute, 2025, https://insthousand,titute.aljazeera.net/en/ajr/article/2983

6.1

Disinformation, Propaganda, and Hate Speech in Context

In many cases of disinformation, we can clearly speak of hybrid warfare in a very volatile security situation, where the government already struggles to control its core troops, not to speak of allied militias, and where each ethnic and religious group has its own band of armed militias. Every single one of the around 60 Syrian media professionals we interviewed —from all around the country and from all ethnic and religious groups, ranging from independent liberal journalists, journalists from *SANA* who had been working under Assad, members of the Journalistic Union, Sunnis close to the government, and Ministry of Information officials— stressed the acute dangers of disinformation. All media professionals, as well as Syrians from all walks of life, confirmed that social media is for themselves, and for the majority of Syrians, the main source of information—and of disinformation.

This is confirmed by *Taakad* and its platform, verify-sy.com: "In the absence of official sources, social media became the main source of news, but also the main breeding ground for disinformation. Networks linked to the former regime —such as the Syrian Electronic Army— re-emerged as disinformation actors, now attacking rivals and independent outlets using new, deceptive narratives."[66]

The absence of reliable mass media and the lack of effective media regulation have created fertile ground for competing 'us versus them' narratives, defamatory speech, and unethical behaviour on social media. Under the Assad regime, Cybercrime Law No. 20 was drafted to criminalise the online dissemination of "false news" deemed harmful to the prestige of the state, but in practice, it functioned primarily as a tool of repression and was never systematically enforced in a way that curbed disinformation. According to the MOI, there are currently no specific laws regulating social media or addressing cybercrime.

Major technology companies, such as Meta and Telegram, also appear largely unwilling or unable to play a constructive regulatory role in the Syrian context. Primo argues that large platforms have failed to protect Syrian users: even when Taakad/Verify-Sy reports harmful content through trusted-partner channels, individual posts are sometimes removed, but disinformation networks often remain intact, partly because Syria is a sanctioned, low-priority market for these firms.[67] This perception is echoed by government officials. The MOI claims to have asked Meta's MENA office in Dubai to close several thousand Facebook and Instagram accounts considered illegitimate, a strategy similar to that pursued by other governments, such as Israel[68] in their efforts to combat coordinated inauthentic behaviour. In Syria, however, the situation is more complex: the transitional authorities are still not recognised by a number of countries, some sanctions and other restrictions remain in place, and US-based technology companies are under no clear obligation to respond to requests from Syrian ministries. An MOI representative described the use of "informal channels" to communicate with Meta's Dubai office.

According to *Taakad*, Telegram has effectively become a "Syrian dark web," hosting a dense ecosystem of opaque channels and groups. While the new authorities have encouraged citizens to use Telegram as an official news source, the absence of content regulation has turned the app into a major hub for misinformation, with false stories circulating there before being recycled on Facebook, X, and WhatsApp.[69] Thus, social media platforms are widely regarded as unregulated spaces prone to propaganda, disinformation, and hate speech.

[66] Verify-Sy, 2025, https://www.verify-sy.com/ar/our-story
[67] EU DisinfoLab, 2025, https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Verify_DisInfo_2025.pptx.pdf
[68] Human Rights Watch, 2023, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2023/12/ip_meta1223%20web.pdf
[69] EU DisinfoLab, 2025, https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/202 5/10/Verify_DisInfo_2025.pptx.pdf

As this report differentiates between these phenomena, the following working definitions are used.

Propaganda is the systematic and strategic communication of information, ideas, or narratives by state or non-state actors to shape perceptions, influence attitudes, and direct behaviour in ways that serve political, ideological, or organisational objectives. It typically relies on selective facts, emotional framing, repetition, and symbolic messaging rather than balanced or verifiable information. Tools of propaganda can —but do not necessarily have to— include disinformation and hate speech.[70]

Disinformation refers to false or misleading information that is deliberately produced and disseminated to deceive audiences, distort public perceptions, or achieve political, economic, or military goals. Unlike misinformation, disinformation is deliberate and often embedded in broader influence operations.[71]

Hate speech refers to expressions —spoken, written, or symbolic— that incite discrimination, hostility, or violence against individuals or groups based on protected characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, or other identity markers. Socially, it functions to dehumanise targeted groups and can contribute to radicalization and mass violence.[72]

The particular challenge in Syria is the extremely fragile political environment, in which propaganda, disinformation, and hate speech can reinforce a climate of revenge-seeking and may trigger violence and fatalities. At the same time, it is important not to overstate a direct, linear, causal link between media messages and violent acts. As Syria expert Charles Lister has argued, “There’s a lot of noise — and plenty of disinformation — swirling around #Syria these days, but cold, hard data shows the country is gradually stabilising. In fact, November has witnessed a huge & sustained decline in violence with weeks of record low levels. With the upcoming 1-year anniversary of #Assad's fall, some seek to trigger major violence, but so far, those attempts have been contained.”[73]

The deeper danger lies in how such content amplifies mutual mistrust and hardens in-group identities. Regarding the killings in the Alawite coastal regions in March 2025, an Atlantic Council analysis concluded that a mix of real and fabricated claims shared on social media produced divergent and mutually exclusive narratives among Alawite and Sunni communities. For many Alawites, the online discourse was interpreted as evidence of a “genocide” against them, while the subsequent debunking of some false claims led many Sunnis to suspect that documented killings of Alawite civilians were themselves fabricated, leaving the two communities with entirely separate understandings of the same events, and even turning interfaith dialogue efforts into disputes over basic facts. As one resident of Latakia summed it up, “The biggest problem is Facebook”.[74]

In the following sections, this report examines concrete cases of propaganda, disinformation, and hate speech along major societal fault lines in Syria. It analyses how political actors and ethno-sectarian groups are both shaped by these narratives and actively contribute to them.

[70] See also for a longer discussion: El Difraoui, 2013
[71] See also the Definition of the Council of Europe: 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/disinformation-and-democratic-resilience/
[72] See also the EU Definition: 2025, https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/hate-speech
[73] Charles Lister, Linkedin, 2025, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/chlister_data-update-november-18-25-activity-7399492574505275392-YI-X/
[74] Atlantic Council, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/sectarianism-social-media-and-syrias-information-blackhole/

6.2

Cases of Disinformation, Hate Speech, and Propaganda

All major communities in Syria carry deep trauma and strong, often competing, narratives of victimhood. Years of regime propaganda and disinformation, combined with real atrocities committed by multiple societal actors and the widespread suffering of civilians, have entrenched powerful cognitive biases and mutual prejudices across these groups.

6.2.1 The New Mediators? The Government, Former HTS, and Sunni Communities

The current Syrian government under Ahmad al-Sharaa presents itself as pursuing an inclusive, nationalist project irrespective of ethnicity or religious affiliation. At the same time, some actors within its broader coalition, particularly among still-existing jihadi factions, continue to engage in hate speech and abuse, raising concerns about the consistency of this inclusive discourse.[75]

Among the Sunni interviewees, attitudes toward the new authorities varied from enthusiastic support to cautious engagement with lingering mistrust, reflecting both past experiences and current uncertainties. Many Sunnis understand themselves as a demographic plurality whose political influence was long constrained under the Assad regime, and whose neighborhoods and regions experienced significant levels of displacement and violence during the war.[76]

These experiences have shaped narratives that emphasize grievances, loss, and a perception of having borne a disproportionate share of the conflict's human and material costs, even as other groups articulate parallel claims of victimization. Across different Sunni constituencies, there are recurring demands for dignity, equal citizenship, and the reintegration of all communities into a reconfigured Syrian state, rather than for an explicitly sectarian order.

In the days before the regime's collapse, HTS and affiliated actors used high-profile deepfakes and misleading clips to shape perceptions of Assad's fate and their own role in the transition. After taking power, elements linked to former HTS shifted from overt disinformation to more conventional, pro-government state media messaging, while allied militias and their online channels continued to deploy explicitly sectarian hate speech around key episodes of violence (see Chapter 3).

Analysts argue that HTS benefited from such disinformation during the crucial weeks leading up to December 2024, using it to bolster its standing and project inevitability amid the shifting balance of power.[77] "On December 1st, 2024, two misleading videos surfaced on YouTube[78] and X[79] allegedly showing al-Assad's resignation and power transfer to the Speaker of the People's Assembly. In these videos, he was also shown expressing regret to the Syrian people and claiming to end all agreements with Iran. However, this was later debunked[80] as the audio in the video clip was discovered to be artificially generated and originally released on September 2nd, 2023. On December 6th, 2024, the Syrian Ministry of Information denied the video's authenticity, coinciding with HTS-led rebel factions capturing Hama, Syria's fourth-largest city."[81] Today, former HTS figures control the Ministry of Information and the main state media, which no longer openly employ hate speech but maintain a consistently pro-government editorial line.

[75] Further reading: https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2025/10/12/syrie-la-paix-a-l-epreuve-d-un-sunnisme-triomphant-et-vengeur_6645871_3210.html
[76] Syria in Transition, 2025, https://www.syriaintransition.com/en/home/opinion/the-myth-of-syria-s-sunni-majority
[77] Soliman, 2025, https://rsis.edu.sg/ctta-newsarticle/disinformation-and-the-battle-for-influence-and-power-in-an-the-emerging-post-assad-syria/
[78] Ibrahiem Elsharkawy, "Address by Bashar al-Assad Resigning and the Capture of Damascus by Opposition Forces, Along with Footage of Assad's Flight," YouTube, December 9, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ffpEEDWJww.
[79] Kimo (@kimo_aly22), "Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad announces his resignation and the transfer of his authority to the President of the People's Assembly," X, December 1, 2024, https://rb.gy/svh0x4.
[80] "Al-Arabiya, 2024, https://shorturl.at/moheu.
[81] Soliman, 2025, https://rsis.edu.sg/ctta-newsarticle/disinformation-and-the-battle-for-influence-and-power-in-an-the-emerging-post-assad-syria/

Journalists and media professionals interviewed for this report—including those broadly sympathetic to the authorities—largely shared the view that state outlets initially minimised and downplayed the coastal violence against Alawite civilians, as well as the clashes in Suwaida, often presenting videos of atrocities as isolated "individual criminal acts" or "mistakes" rather than as part of wider patterns.

At the same time, government-allied militias and associated online ecosystems contributed to the escalation of sectarian hatred during the March 2025 violence in the coastal regions of Syria. A recent report by the UN Human Rights Council documents that, around March 6th, several Telegram channels, including one impersonating the Operations Command (MOC) amassing more than 70,000 followers, disseminated explicitly sectarian rhetoric that repeatedly used derogatory terms for Alawites and issued direct threats. One such channel posted a video claiming that "waves of convoys" were heading toward the coast, accompanied by audio promising retribution against "Alawi pigs" and asserting that fighters were 40 kilometres from Tartus; hours later, the same channel announced that "harvest morning" in Tartus had begun, language the UN interprets as incitement linked to the subsequent massacres.[82] Later, the same impostor account, posing as an official MOC Telegram channel, posted a video showing detainees forced onto their hands and knees and made to bark like dogs. The report further stresses that the recording of the gravest abuses —including multiple executions and footage of perpetrators walking beside dead bodies— and their broad circulation on social media "contributed to heightened fear within the Alawi community, reflecting a perceived climate of impunity".[83]

The UN investigation also underlines that hate speech in Syria has not been limited to online platforms but has been propagated through other channels often overlooked today. It notes that loudspeakers from mosques in Hama, Homs, Latakia, Baniyas, Jablah, and Aleppo issued calls infused with sectarian rhetoric, which appeared to target the Alawi population as a whole and were widely understood as a religious call for mobilisation requiring immediate action.[84]

Today, the transitional government is often confronted with the same types of disinformation that HTS itself previously used. For example, on July 18th, the *Al-Mayadeen TV* channel published a series of fabricated claims alleging that Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa had left the capital Damascus with his family, that a military unit had entered the state radio and television building, and that assassination operations had targeted prominent figures, including Defense Minister Murhaf Abu Qusra. The channel later deleted these false claims without providing any clarification or apology.[85]

The government itself is frequently portrayed by opponents as a "resurrected al-Qaida emirate," and Ahmad al-Sharaa is called under his jihadi *nom de guerre*, al-Joulani, "a terrorist in a suit." Claims have circulated via messaging apps and news groups alleging that a widely shared video shows a beheading carried out by fighters affiliated with the Syrian government. However, this claim is misleading, as open-source verification has shown that the footage dates back to the period of ISIS activity in Syria and Iraq and is unrelated to the recent waves of violence in Syria.[86]

A number of social media accounts have launched coordinated campaigns with similar messaging. One page, under the name Sarmad al-Tall, presents its owner as a "legislative judge at the United Nations headquarters." He published a series titled "Yes, I Met the Terrorist al-Joulani," in which he claimed to have met the new Syrian

[82] OHCR, 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session59/a-hrc-59-crp4-en.pdf
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Verify Media Platform, https://www.facebook.com/VerifyMP
[86] Ibid.

president, Ahmad al-Sharaa, exploiting his self-declared UN status to suggest privileged access to decision-making circles. In these posts, al-Tall repeatedly describes the Syrian president as "the terrorist al-Joulani," combining personal attacks with sectarian accusations and conspiracy narratives. Fact-checking investigations have found no evidence for his purported UN role, and al-Tall's activity is cited as an example of impersonation and organized disinformation targeting the current authorities.[87]

6.2.2. The Vulnerable Backbone of the State: The Urban Educated Middle Class

This group, which is often overlooked in analysis, aspires to a modern Syria and is indispensable for the functioning of the new transitional state. It sees itself as the administrative, cultural, and professional backbone of the country. The cross-sectarian group —composed of Sunnis, Alawites, Christians, Druze, and Kurds— defines its identity through education, modernity, professional competence, and attachment to urban life. It views itself as the stabilising force that sustains state institutions, civil society, and the country's intellectual life. Devastated by war, displacement, inflation, and the destruction of urban centres, this middle class feels traumatised and economically weak but remains crucial to reconstruction. It prioritises stability, rule of law, technocratic governance, and secular civic identity, while rejecting militia rule and sectarian politics. Although cautious about the transitional government, it has so far supported it as the most viable option. This class is very active on social media as a consumer and also produces a large amount of content. It is also a frequent victim of disinformation, as it is the backbone for the functioning of the transitional state and the rebuilding of Syria. If it is destabilised and its' trust in the transitional government is eroded, the regime and the state might collapse — an aim which a number of spoilers, for example the Foloul, clearly pursue.

A very sophisticated campaign targeted members of this middle class active on social media and not only journalists, with alleged copyright violations, by sending emails from a fake account of the "Ministry of Information" for a "copyright takedown." The aim was to take down positive posts about the transitional government, for example, celebrations for the first anniversary of the revolution or even small achievements such as a "video of a beautification project in a public square in Aleppo – removed under claims of ownership by the 'Syrian Ministry of Information.'"[88]

The same campaign also convinced Facebook to take down posts with the same copyright infringement claims. These campaigns were partly orchestrated by networks present and supportive of the Assad regime —at that time, with Russian support[89]— for example, the "Yalla" Media Group director, Ahmad Moumneh, whose networks apparently continued their activities under the transitional government.[90]

With the precarious security situation in Syria, where a high number of kidnappings on sectarian grounds occur, these crimes are vastly exaggerated, especially to polarise this urban middle class and to stoke sectarian tension. One piece of disinformation that initially caused tremendous outrage in Syria and even received international attention is the famous Mira and Ahmad case. Ahmad, a Muslim, was alleged to have kidnapped the Alawite girl Mira. The case was portrayed as "kidnapping, enslavement, and forced marriage," especially in the city of Homs, where both reappeared. This led to considerable tensions between the sizeable Alawite community and the Sunnis. Previously, violent confrontations had already taken place.

[87] Verify-Sy, 2025, https://www.verify-sy.com/ar/report/2507111920
[88] Verify-Sy, 2025, https://www.verify-sy.com/ar/report/2503242338
[89] The Guardian, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/19/russia-backed-network-of-syria-conspiracy-theorists-identified)
[90] Verify-Sy, 2025, https://www.verify-sy.com/ar/factcheck/10704

In reality, the young couple had simply run away because their respective parents opposed their marriage. A local journalist ran into them in the street and started a live broadcast where both explained what happened and seemed unfazed, as he told the author of these pages. But the controversy was not over: it was then alleged that Mira was still forced into a marriage by a Salafist because she wore a veil.[91]

Disinformation involving women is quite frequent. To provide another example: A girl claimed to be Maya Alou, was allegedly found dead with a gunshot wound to the head after being kidnapped in the Tel Kalakh area. Verfy-sy investigations revealed that the picture actually belongs to an Iranian girl named Niloufar Zamani, and the image used in the claim was posted on her Instagram account on October 14th, 2024.[92]

6.2.3 The Spoiler Networks: The Foloul

The Foloul —remnants of the Assad-era political, military, and security establishment— appear to play an active role in many of the disinformation campaigns targeting the transitional authorities. Their narrative often combines elements of victimhood, entitlement, and revisionism: they present themselves as victims of an orchestrated campaign aiming for their extinction. At the same time, they mobilise their community and call for resistance against the aggressors. They tend to frame the current authorities as inexperienced, illegitimate, and unable to provide stability, drawing on nostalgia for the authoritarian "order" of pre-2011 Syria.

Within this milieu, segments of the Foloul envision a partial or full return to influence and engage in propaganda, political sabotage, and the mobilisation of loyalist networks inside and outside the country. Their messaging is shaped by a mix of resentment, fear of accountability, and the conviction that they remain best placed to restore security, which makes them a persistent spoiler constellation in the transitional process. One illustrative slogan reported by Alawite interlocutors in Damascus is "Assad will return much stronger," encapsulating the expectation among some loyalist circles that the current order is temporary.

These remnants of the former regime —including ex-military and intelligence officers— have long-standing experience in propaganda and disinformation, notably through structures such as the Syrian Electronic Army. During the civil war, they helped orchestrate large-scale campaigns, for example, against the White Helmets, often in coordination with external allies. Such efforts built a repertoire of tactics, narratives, and networks that are now repurposed in the post-Assad context.[93]

Foloul-linked accounts appear to have moved quickly after the HTS takeover in December 2024 to adapt to the new environment and exploit sectarian sensitivities, unresolved grievances and security incidents. One example is the circulation of an old video showing the burning of a prominent Alawite shrine in Aleppo, which helped fuel demonstrations in Tartus and other areas; initially small in scale, these protests intensified as news spread of an ambush near Kherbet al-Maʿza in Syria's coastal region, further heightening tensions. Such reuse of historical or de-contextualised footage is typical of attempts to inflame fears of targeted violence.[94]

Following the violent clashes in March 2025 —which multiple observers suggest may have been triggered by attacks on government troops involving Foloul-aligned actors— researchers documented a pronounced spike in misleading content between April 5th and 7th, 2025. This material circulated largely via messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and included claims of mass violence against Alawite civilians, some of which were fabricated

[91] Enab Baladi, 2025, https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives,/2025/05/distorted-narratives-create-division-among-syrians
[92] Verify Media Platform, https://www.facebook.com/VerifyMP
[93] The Guardian, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/19/russia-backed-network-of-syria-conspiracy-theorists-identified
[94] OHCHR, 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session59/a-hrc-59-crp4-en.pdf

or misattributed. These narratives gained traction in regions already anxious about possible retaliation or political marginalisation and in an environment with limited trusted local reporting.[95] This episode stood out for its targeted use of partial truths and high-context messaging. False claims of imminent attacks in the coastal governorates appeared shortly after real incidents in Homs, thereby increasing their perceived credibility among already worried communities. Monitoring organisations reported coordinated activity by Arabic-language social media accounts, including some that appeared to be foreign-run, which disseminated calls to mobilise and "defend" local populations.[96]

6.2.4 Targets of Threats: The Alawites

Among many Alawites, contemporary narratives often stress a sense of double victimization: being exploited by the former regime on the one hand and threatened by its opponents —particularly jihadist groups— on the other, whose rhetoric has fueled enduring fears of revenge and annihilation. Many interlocutors describe Alawites less as beneficiaries of the Assad system than as communities that bore disproportionate wartime burdens, including high casualty rates and widespread forced conscription.[97] The result is a population that is deeply traumatized, demographically imbalanced, and distrustful of most armed actors, with core priorities centering on physical security, equal citizenship, protection from retaliation, and recognition of its suffering.

Despite the Assad family's Alawite background, large segments of the Alawite population remain economically marginalised, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas.

Some voices in the diaspora and online spaces promote narratives of "Alawite exceptionalism" or claims such as "we protected Syria," but these discourses represent only a subset of Alawite opinion and circulate mainly through specific diaspora pages and networks rather than the community as a whole.

Available reporting suggests that most Alawite spiritual and community leaders have not engaged in hate speech or systematic disinformation campaigns and instead emphasise community protection[98] and some of them autonomy.[99] It is the Alawite remnants of the former regime, the Foloul, who systematically weaponise disinformation. However, the community's precarious status and accumulated fears make many individuals particularly susceptible to rumours, especially those grounded in real risks of displacement or retaliation. For instance, viral posts have falsely claimed that the government ordered the "eviction of Alawites from Damascus," amplifying confusion and anxiety, even though there may indeed be isolated eviction orders related to disputed property titles and wartime housing occupations.[100]

In this context of insecurity, Alawites are also vulnerable to disinformation circulated by remnants of the former regime. One prominent example was the rumor that Maher al-Assad, the ousted president's brother, was "returning to the coast with the Russian army" to organise a counter-coup; the transitional authorities publicly denied these claims, stressing that no such deployment existed. Episodes like this illustrate how targeted narratives can mobilise fear and raise expectations of renewed loyalist protection, even when they lack factual basis.[101]

[95] ARK International, https://www.ark.international/ark-blog/syrias-digital-war-disinformation-sectarianism-and-the-risks-of-rfimi
[96] Ibid.
[97] For a historical perspective of the Alawites under the Assads see: https://ourarchive.otago.ac.nz/esploro/outputs/doctoral/The-Politics-of-Sectarian-Insecurity-Alawite/9926479007601891
[98] BBC News, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35941679.amp
[99] The New York Times, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/25/world/middleeast/syria-alawites-protest.html
[100] United Nations, 2025, https://news.un.org/ar/story/2025/08/1143270
[101] Shafaq News Agency, 2025, https://shafaq.com/en/World/Syrian-Administration-denies-rumors-of-Maher-Al-Assad-s-return

6.2.5 Losing Trust: The Druze

Druze describe their community as historically cohesive, with strong traditions of local autonomy and a moral code grounded in honour, moderation, and communal solidarity. At the same time, interlocutors often stress a cautious, conditional stance toward any central government, reflecting a long-standing pattern of cooperating with state authorities while resisting domination. Their narratives are shaped by memories of persecution, a legacy of self-defense, and enduring mistrust toward Islamist groups, some Bedouin tribes, and central security institutions.[102]

The violent clashes in spring and summer 2025 reinforced the conviction among many Druze that self-governance and locally controlled security structures are crucial to their survival, and have strengthened resistance to external interference. Against the backdrop of their initial willingness to work with the new authorities despite their jihadi background, current Druze demands centre on autonomy, protection of the community, and respect for religious practices. Many voices emphasize a desire to remain part of Syria while safeguarding Suwaida as a predominantly Druze region with substantial self-government.

Shortly before the March violence in Alawite areas, even Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri —one of the three most prominent Druze spiritual leaders and among the most skeptical of the new rulers' intentions— publicly expressed readiness for "participation in the Syrian state" and rejected offers of protection from Israel. This indicated that, at least for a time, key Druze leaders were prepared to explore conditional cooperation with the transitional authorities.[103]

The situation deteriorated sharply following violence in late April 2025. A widely circulated voice recording attributed to a Druze cleric insulting the Prophet Mohammad triggered anti-Druze protests and hate speech across Syria. In this tense atmosphere, pro-government Sunni armed groups attacked the Damascus suburb of Jaramana, leaving at least six Druze fighters and seven Sunni fighters dead. The incident deepened mistrust between Druze leaders and the central authorities and raised concerns about the ease with which inflammatory content could escalate into armed clashes.

The renewed violence in the city and governorate of Suwaida at the beginning of July 2025 marked a turning point. Political analysts like the Syria specialist Wassim Nasr note that many Druze now seem to gravitate toward the camp around Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, some of whose followers have staged demonstrations displaying images of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu[104], a clear show of defiance towards the central government in Damascus. There are currently no central government forces deployed in Suwaida, reinforcing the de facto autonomy of local structures.

Interviews with journalists in Damascus suggest that state media coverage of the Druze issue has been highly biased: outlets such as *Al-Ikhbariya* and the *SANA* news agency largely refrained from criticizing government conduct, even when reporting on serious abuses by government-aligned troops. At the same time, an intense disinformation struggle is unfolding between, on one side, hardline Islamist and likely Bedouin Arab networks and, on the other, actors sympathetic to the Druze cause. Much of the content in circulation cannot be reliably attributed to specific organisations or leaders, underscoring the opacity of the information environment and the difficulty of assigning clear responsibility for individual campaigns.

[102] Further readings on Druze attitudes to central authorities: https://interstices-fajawat.org/2025/02/the-druze-of-lebanon-and-syria-a-long-history-of-insubordination/ https://joshualandis.com/blog/druze-syrian-conflict-talal-el-atrache
[103] International Crisis Group, 2025, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/syria/253-restoring-security-post-assad-syria-lessons-coast-and-Suwaida
[104] Wassim Nasr, 2025, https://x.com/SimNasr/status/1993031039187325334

Below are some examples of pro-and anti-Druze disinformation retrieved from verify-sy.com:

Example 1 — Fake threats against Druze (pro-Druze disinformation)

Video footage was circulated allegedly showing a fighter from the Bedouin tribes threatening Druze in Suwaida with slaughter. However, verify-sy.com found that this clip is an edited segment from a 2015 video featuring a Libyan leader in Syria named "Abu Hafs," who is urging individuals to surrender and stop fighting alongside the Assad regime. The video was originally filmed in Kafr Nabl during the 2012 battles to liberate the city.[105]

Example 2 — Disinformation attributed to a Lebanese/Druze politician

The President of the Lebanese Arab Unification Party and former minister for environment in Lebanon, Wiam Wahhab, published a video in July 2025 allegedly showing 'state missiles targeting Suwaida'. The team of verify-sy.com found that the video in question was previously circulated in September 2022 actually showing a rocket targeting Ukrainian armed forces in the Kharkiv region.[106]

Example 3 — Anti-Druze disinformation showing fabricated executions

A video was circulated in July 2025 allegedly showing a Druze terrorist group affiliated with Hikmat al-Hijri carrying out mass executions of Syrian security personnel. The Verify-Sy team found that the video is old, originally published on February 2nd, 2023. The footage depicts the execution of members of a group linked to the militia of Raji Falhout, which was supported by the Military Intelligence Division of the ousted regime.[107]

Example 4 — A child used in disinformation

A video circulating in social media mid 2025 allegedly shows a Bedouin boy who was killed by fighters from the al-Hijri faction in Suwaida, dragged to death by tying his arms to two vehicles. Verification by verify-sy.com reveals that the image shows Mandoub Farhan Al-Hussein, a child from the Mahmoudli camp in Raqqa province, who died after falling from the top of Jaabar Castle near the Euphrates River. The incident is unrelated to any acts of violence in Suwaida.[108]

6.2.6 Emphasising Trauma: The Christians

Syrian Christians often describe themselves as one of the country's oldest indigenous communities, deeply embedded in its urban, cultural, and religious history.[109] They primarily define their identity in civic and cultural terms rather than in narrowly sectarian ones; frequently Christian communities are seen as a moderating social force and an important pillar of education, professional life, and urban culture.

Christian narratives since 2011 are strongly shaped by experiences of mass displacement, demographic decline, and targeted violence by ISIS and other extremist actors. Christians commonly articulate a "double fear": on the one hand, of Islamist extremism, and on the other of marginalisation within any future political order perceived as Sunni-dominated.

While many Christians are cautiously hopeful that the transitional authorities may open space for greater political pluralism, doubts persist about the state's capacity to guarantee security. In light of extensive emigration and shrinking numbers, their core priorities centre on personal and community safety, equal citizenship, secular or civil governance, and the protection of cultural and religious autonomy.

[105] Verify-Sy, 2025, https://verify-sy.com/ar/factcheck/2507201619
[106] Verify-Sy, 2025, https://verify-sy.com/ar/factcheck/2507211355
[107] Verify Media Platform, https://www.facebook.com/VerifyMP
[108] Ibid.
[109] For a summary of the situation of the Syrian Christians see: https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/christians-new-syria-accepted-risk

Disinformation posts —of which a large number target Christian audiences— seek both to frighten a community already victimized by Islamist violence and to turn segments of it against the transitional government. One widely circulated claim alleged that Syrian security forces had assassinated Bishop Nikola Baalbaki, the Greek Orthodox bishop of Hama, in an ambush near Mhardeh, and that his driver had been kidnapped and his vehicle stolen. This narrative implied direct state responsibility for an attack on a prominent Christian figure and spread quickly across social media. The claim was false: the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Hama denied the reports in an official statement on its Facebook page, and Bishop Baalbaki later appeared in a video confirming that he was unharmed and in good health.[110]

Deutsche Welle's fact-checking team has documented similarly inflammatory content aimed at international and local Christian audiences. One viral post on X falsely claimed that "Islamist jihadists are crucifying Christians in Syria while the Vatican and certain cardinals celebrate Ramadan," accompanied by a still image allegedly showing the crucifixion scene. Several posts and online articles repeated this claim, framing it as evidence of both Islamist brutality and Western indifference.[111]

6.2.7 Between Empowerment and Vulnerability: The Kurds

Many Syrian Kurds describe themselves as an indigenous population that has long faced marginalisation and repression, and that has only recently gained a degree of political empowerment through the establishment of the AANES in southeast of Syria. Their collective memory is shaped by experiences of Arabisation policies, denial of citizenship, and restrictions on cultural expression, alongside pride in constructing what they present as a pluralistic, egalitarian, and gender-progressive model of self-governance. Kurds frequently highlight their central role in defeating ISIS and view this sacrifice as a key source of legitimacy for their political aspirations, while simultaneously fearing abandonment by regional and international allies and remaining deeply skeptical of the new, predominantly Sunni transitional government.[112]

Although internally diverse in ideology, class, and local experience, many Kurdish actors converge on demands for decentralised self-rule, constitutional recognition of Kurdish identity, and robust protection of cultural and linguistic rights. Their narratives often emphasize resilience, modernity, and women's emancipation, and stress that the gains achieved since 2012 cannot be reversed without firm legal and security guarantees. Within this framing, Kurdish political and military structures see themselves as indispensable stakeholders in building a future Syrian order that is federal, democratic, and inclusive.

Kurdish media professionals themselves acknowledge that actors within their own camp have sometimes used disinformation, especially during intense phases of the war against ISIS. One journalist, for example, recounted spreading an unverified claim that ISIS, with Turkish support, had seized a border post near Kobani, illustrating how even professional and generally serious media could engage in rumour-based mobilisation under wartime pressure.

Research on AANES-related outlets indicates that some channels have disseminated misleading content in the past when attempting to quell unrest among Arab residents and tribal communities living under their administration. In certain cases, operations against local opponents or protesting groups have been publicly framed as campaigns against ISIS remnants or so-called "Daeshi tribes," while subsequent investigations suggest that the primary objective was to suppress dissent

[110] Verify-Sy, 2025, https://verify-sy.com/ar/factcheck/2508131315
[111] DW, 2025, https://www.dw.com/en/violence-syria-alawites-fact-check-social-media-claims/a-71879244
[112] Hasan, 2023

among non-Kurdish populations. According to monitoring organisations, these narratives have occasionally been supported with recycled or de-contextualised videos that are not directly related to the events in question.[113]

The AANES has a strong incentive to emphasise the ongoing threat posed by ISIS, not only because real security risks persist, but also because highlighting this threat helps justify continued US military and political support as a deterrent against Turkish intervention and a safeguard for its autonomous structures. This security framing can blur the line between legitimate threat assessments and politically useful risk inflation, especially in communications aimed at international audiences.

At the same time, the AANES is itself a frequent target of disinformation campaigns that accuse it of systemic mistreatment of non-Kurdish communities, particularly Arabs and Turkmen, and of harboring an inherently anti-Arab or separatist agenda. Many of these claims mix documented grievances with exaggerations or fabrications, making it difficult for local residents and external observers to distinguish between credible criticism and politically motivated smears. The following examples are retrieved from verify-sy.com:

Example 1: False claim of SDF raids against Arab tribal members

A video was distributed on social media in August 2025 allegedly showing tribal men involved in the Suwaida massacres being arrested by Syrian Democratic Forces. Verify-sy investigations revealed that the video is old and was broadcasted by local channels more than two years ago.[114]

Example 2: Fake video of Zubeid tribes declaring war on SDF

A video was circulated July 2025 on social media allegedly showing the tribes of Zubeid in northern Syria announcing the formation of a war council to fight the "terrorist SDF militias backed by the U.S. and Israel". Verify-Sy investigations revealed that the video was originally published by Halab Today TV on September 7th, 2023, showing a statement by the Zubeid tribes in northern Syria related to the formation of a war council to manage battles against the SDF in the Aleppo countryside.[115]

Other posts of disinformation try to portray the Kurds themselves as divided, with infighting and assassination attempts against their leadership, for example Mazloum Abdi, the commander-in-chief of the SDF.

Example 3: Fake Al-Jazeera report on assassination attempt

In July 2025 a piece of news was circulated in social media, allegedly published by Al Jazeera, about an assassination attempt on Mazloum Abdi amid heavy clashes between SDF factions. Verify-Sy confirms that Al Jazeera did never publish such a statement.[116]

6.2.8 Targeting 'Infidels': ISIS Members and Sympathisers

ISIS presents itself as the sole defender of "true Islam," branding other Muslim currents as deviant and denouncing followers of Shiism, Alawism, Druzism, secularism, and other traditions as unbelievers. In its narrative, the group claims to restore the caliphate abolished in 1924 and repeatedly describes Syria and the Levante as the central battlefield of the end-times, drawing heavily on apocalyptic prophecy that situates the final confrontation between "true believers" and "infidels" on Syrian soil. Within this framework, violence against minorities is framed as divinely mandated. ISIS propaganda routinely calls for attacks on Alawites, Shias, Christians, Druze, Kurds, and other groups it casts as enemies, using a mixture of religious language, battlefield

[113] Reliefweb, 2025, https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-disinformation-context-deir-ez-zor-unrest-enar
[114] Verify Media Platform, https://www.facebook.com/VerifyMP
[115] Verify-Sy, 2025, https://verify-sy.com/ar/factcheckLevant/2507292101
[116] Verify Media Platform, https://www.facebook.com/VerifyMP

imagery, and sectarian narratives to legitimise brutality and recruit followers.[117]

Remnants of ISIS continue to insist that it is "a state, not a militia," presenting itself not merely as a clandestine armed group but as an ongoing state-building project, with references to its own courts, taxation systems, intelligence networks, and administrative structures as an underground continuation of the self-declared caliphate. Even after the collapse of its territorial control, ISIS remnants remain active in parts of Syria and retain significant propaganda expertise, as seen in the earlier production of highly choreographed terror videos and the mass recruitment of foreign fighters, including Europeans, during 2015–2016. This accumulated experience in media operations and online influence means that ISIS and aligned networks still possess considerable capacity to shape narratives, intimidate opponents, and test new forms of communication, even with more limitedresources and tighter security constraints than during the height of the "caliphate."

In the current phase, ISIS propaganda has increasingly targeted Ahmad al-Sharaa and actors associated with the former HTS milieu[118]. The group portrays al-Sharaa as an infidel adversary and has developed elaborate narratives depicting HTS and the new Syrian authorities as proxies for Western or "apostate" interests. According to recent analyses, ISIS has issued fatwas calling for al-Sharaa's assassination, including in its biweekly online newsletter Al-Nabaa[119], and has vowed to continue military operations in Syria.[120]

ISIS positions itself as the only uncompromising jihadist actor, seeking to delegitimise rival Islamist groups by questioning their religious credentials, framing them as collaborators, and coupling doctrinal attacks with calls for targeted violence.[121]

6.2.9 FIMI – The Foreign Dimension

FIMI and Foreign Powers

The MENA region as a whole has, for a long time, been the target of large-scale Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) campaigns, especially by Russia.[122] MENA is particularly susceptible to media influence due to a shared Arabic language among its 380 million inhabitants. External actors continuously seek to exploit the region's complexity. The countries of the region are perceived by FIMI actors as soft targets for advancing their strategic interests.

At the beginning of 2025, *BBC Arabic* published a report about vast networks of foreign-based accounts aimed at spreading disinformation and inciting sectarian tensions in post-Assad Syria: "The investigation revealed widespread patterns of disinformation, including the dissemination of false claims, the recycling of outdated content, and the use of fake accounts for propaganda purposes."[123]

Foreign powers have conflicting and vested interests in Syria and, to varying degrees, interfere in Syrian politics, public debate, and its media landscape. Among them are Iran, Israel, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United States, and Qatar. Syria, during the civil war, was for a long time the target of more or less concerted FIMI campaigns by both pro- and anti-government external actors. As most of the above-mentioned actors now support the transitional government as they hope for stability in Syria, two main spoilers remain: Iran and Israel.

[117] El Difraoui, 2021
[118] For a good risk assessment see the report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team: https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/482
[119] See for example https://www.specialeurasia.com/2025/05/18/al-naba-495-al-sharaa-jihad/
[120] Soliman, 2025, https://rsis.edu.sg/ctta-newsarticle/disinformation-and-the-battle-for-influence-and-power-in-an-the-emerging-post-assad-syria/
[121] El Difraoui, 2021
[122] Sleibi, 2023, https://www.iemed.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Wartime-Russian-Disinformation-MENA-Region-Sleibi-IEMedYearbook2023.pdf
[123] The New Arab, 2025, https://www.newarab.com/news/networks-foreign-accounts-spreading-sectarian-hate-syri

Syrian Ministry of Information representatives argue that external actors, particularly in Israel and Iran, are among the main drivers of online hate speech and disinformation directed against the current government. This framing situates information threats primarily outside Syria, emphasising regional information warfare rather than domestic dissent.

Russia appears to be in a more attentive and cautious position. Turkey is still active in campaigning against the Kurds of the AANES, whereas Saudi Arabia and Qatar try to assert their rival interests in the Arab world. The US remains an important political actor, but is no longer an important media actor since President Trump's defunding of Arabic-speaking media.

Iran

Iran has been militarily weakened and its "Axis of Resistance" shattered. Its ally, the Assad regime, is gone and thus its land access to support the Lebanese Hezbollah —which itself was severely weakened— is cut. Shortly after the takeover of Damascus by HTS, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, called on Syrians to resist the emerging rebel-led government, claiming that the uprising was orchestrated by the West.[124]

The fact that, as BBC Arabic discovered, more than 60 per cent of the accounts sharing misleading content were located outside Syria, with activity concentrated in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Iran[125], points to Iranian influence, as the country still has a considerable number of proxies there. Tehran tries to destabilise the transitional government and exert influence on Syrians, especially Shiites, who previously had their own militias, including from within Syria. It is even alleged to have created a new organisational structure, the "Islamic Resistance Front in Syria – Possessors of Might", described as "a propaganda and paramilitary formation with stated ambitions to form a new anti-government insurgent and political structure in Syria."[126]

Israel

Israel, under Netanyahu, tries to portray itself as the defender of the Druze. Yet it appears that the country wants to exert even more control over parts of the Syrian Golan Heights, which it not only conquered in 1967 but also later occupied. Israel is also very wary of a government in Damascus formed by former jihadists. Since December 2024, Israel's armed forces have carried out more than a thousand military attacks on Syrian territory mainly targeting military installations. They have penetrated the UN buffer zone on the Golan Heights and occupied further land in southern Syria. It is often alleged that the Israelis would like to partition the country into Alawi, Druze, Kurdish, and Sunni statelets so that no unified Syria could ever again pose a threat to Israel.[127] Quite frequently, the transitional government is portrayed as pursuing a hidden jihadist Al-Qaeda agenda, as the following assessment from an Israeli research centre, Alma, illustrates:

"His [Al-Sharaa] public distancing from Al-Qaeda is not ideological but stems from an effort to reduce international pressure and improve his image, thereby gaining domestic and international legitimacy as the leader of Syria — legitimacy which will serve as the foundation for an Islamic state (the caliphate) in the future."[128]

Russia

Russia - after having crucially helped the Assad regime survive nearly fourteen years of civil war, including indiscriminate aerial bombardment, but also through massive hybrid media warfare, both via the vast presence

[124] Radio Free Europe, 2024, https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-supreme-leader-syria-rebel-government/33249008.html
[125] The New Arab, 2025, https://www.newarab.com/news/networks-foreign-accounts-spreading-sectarian-hate-syria
[126] Mumayiz & Malik, 2025, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-uli-al-baa
[127] Diwan, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2025/03/the-pull-of-partition?lang=en
[128] Alma Research and Education Center, 2025, https://israel-alma.org/is-al-sharaa-implementing-al%D6%BEqaedas-strategy-in-order-to-revert-to-being-al-julani/

of official media such as RT Arabic and Sputnik and through large-scale campaigns on social media[129] - is currently following a cautious approach. It wants to keep the Tartous naval base and the Hmeimim airbase, its only footholds in the Eastern Mediterranean and crucial, for example, for supplying its "militias" in Africa, such as the Africa Corps (ex-Wagner) in the Sahel.[130]

President al-Sharaa's visit to Moscow and meeting with Putin in October 2025— who hailed Syria's parliamentary elections held in November 2025 as a "big success", saying they would help consolidate society[131]— is a far cry from portraying him as a terrorist. The Syrian transitional government is equally pragmatic: it tries to obtain from Russia what it can financially and in terms of leverage vis-à-vis the USA. One major point of contention remains the presence of former President Bashar al-Assad in Russia. Russia's attitude might change if its strategic interests are threatened by the Syrian government, and it might then very quickly re-engage in major disinformation campaigns. Russian media in the Arabic world continue to portray the war in Ukraine as justified and vilify Europe as warmongers that support Israel unconditionally — an argument to which Syrians, given the widening occupation of the Golan Heights and Israel's support for the Druze, might lend an ear.

Turkey

Turkey is possibly the biggest foreign player in Syria and wields considerable influence. It has long advised, supplied, and supported HTS governance in the Idlib province and maintains very close ties to the regime in Damascus. It also has major economic interests, especially in Aleppo. According to its foreign-policy doctrine of the "Caring Nation", Turkey presents itself as one of the world's largest contributors of humanitarian aid and as a stabilising force promoting peaceful coexistence between all components of Syrian society.

The major issue, however, is the Kurds and the future of the AANES.[132] Any long-term, independent Kurdish autonomous region on its borders that would set an example for Kurdish areas inside Turkey itself —or support the PKK with weapons or training— is a red line. The above-mentioned disinformation about the mistreatment of Arabs by the AANES can originate from pro-Turkish actors. It is furthermore alleged that organs of the Turkish state are directly involved in disinformation campaigns.

On January 12th, 2025, *Yeni Şafak*, a newspaper aligned with Erdoğan, published a report falsely claiming that Iran would supply the SDF with 1,500 Iranian drones. *The Jerusalem Post* subsequently repeated this disinformation. On the same day, *Clash Report*, a news outlet that propagates fake content aligned with Turkish government interests, disseminated the narrative, referencing The Jerusalem Post's coverage to add credibility.[133] The information was entirely false.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia

Qatar and its regional rival Saudi Arabia both mainly hope for stability in Syria and to reaffirm their position as a major regional player, including in the media sphere. Through the expansion of *Syria TV* and *Al Jazeera* — undoubtedly the most powerful television network in the region — and its operations in Syria, Qatar will attempt to influence domestic politics in Syria. Both countries also have an influential Syrian diaspora and economic interests. However, neither have much interest in supporting any form of democracy in Syria, be it islamic or not, as this might encourage liberal movements and further calls for democracy in their own countries.

[129] For more background on Russian propaganda in Syria see: https://fiia.fi/en/publication/russias-propaganda-war-about-syria
[130] The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/07/tartus-port-and-syrias-new-geo-economic-strategy/
[131] The Associated Press, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/russia-putin-syria-alsharaa-visit-kremlin-assad-f24f4de9831cfa5d81e75a4ae4b8a881
[132] For further reading on the Syrian-Turkish relationship see: https://www.iris-france.org/en/turquie-syrie-breve-anatomie-dune-relation-compliquee/
[133] Middle East Forum, 2025, https://www.meforum.org/mef-observer/Türkiyes-propaganda-campaign-to-tar-syrian-kurds-as-iranian-allies

The USA

The USA, which was very active in the media sphere in the MENA region following the invasion of Iraq and created powerful outlets to counter the influence of *Al Jazeera* —notably *Al-Hurra*— is no longer a significant media actor. Following President Trump's decision in May 2025 to defund *Al-Hurra*, its umbrella *Middle East Broadcasting Networks* (MBN), and *Voice of America*[134], the US no longer maintains official Arabic-language broadcast channels, although some online presence remains. This weakens the position of the USA as a major political actor in Syria.

Who would have imagined that Ahmad al-Sharaa —on whose head a bounty of USD 10 million was once placed — would be received at the White House? The USA must balance several interests: the security of Israel; a stable Syria with oil and other exploitable resources; and the fact that the USA trained Kurdish militias to fight ISIS. Thus, the USA acts as a broker between the Kurds, the central government, and Turkey. How things will evolve under the volatile decision-making of the Trump administration remains to be seen.

In summary, FIMI, in terms of disinformation and hate speech, currently appears to be a lesser threat than domestic disinformation produced by different societal groups. Still, the threat should not be underestimated, as two spoilers —Iran and, so far, to a lesser degree, Israel— are actively working to destabilise Syria. Russia might revert to aggressive disinformation campaigns if it perceives that it cannot retain its important military bases.

[134] Los Angeles Times, 2025, https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2025-05-03/al-hurra-story

7

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Syria today faces not only the herculean tasks of reconstruction, economic stabilization, political transition, and the return of security, but a profound crisis of trust. Every societal group —Sunnis, Alawites, Kurds, Christians, Druze, the urban middle class, and tribal communities— feels traumatised, marginalised, and often victimised by narratives that portray "the other" as a threat. Disinformation exploits trauma, fear, and mistrust by magnifying local grievances into national ruptures. It pushes society toward fragmentation when cohesion is essential. While not all population groups engage to the same degree in propaganda, disinformation, and hate speech, all these forms of communication have reached a level where, taken together, they can undermine the transitional process, especially through orchestrated campaigns by spoilers, such as the Foloul or radical Islamist groupings.

Foreign actors —such as Turkey and Russia— currently show a certain restraint, as both, for different reasons, have an interest in a stable Syria. Turkey, the historical backer of HTS, will not engage in campaigns against the transitional government, but may launch large-scale campaigns against the Kurds of the AANES. Russia is currently negotiating with the transitional government regarding the maintenance of its two military bases. Should these negotiations sour, the country may restart its FIMI campaigns in cooperation with the Foloul. Iran is clearly a spoiler; it engages in considerable disinformation efforts and tries to discredit the transitional governments as "Jihadi terrorists".

In the current climate, it is important to identify forces in the public arena that hold society together and work against divisive forces, be they foreign or domestic. Which groups, platforms, or communication strategies strengthen social cohesion and a sense of unity in Syria today? Public service broadcasting could provide a comprehensive answer, as it is designed to serve all Syrians through inclusive principles such as minority representation, dialogue, and impartiality. Clearly, the Ministry of Information is aware of the dangers currently deriving from disinformation and of the opportunities afforded by the public service broadcasting model. During his attendance at the GMF conference in Bonn in July 2025, the minister publicly outlined a public service agenda for the future of state broadcasters in Syria. In the same spirit, senior ministry executives confirmed that the state broadcasting system will be developed to offer inclusive, pluralistic, and balanced programming. Given the fragile state of Syrian society, this commitment is non-negotiable. However, the new government has also made it clear on various occasions that it will not blindly follow Western guidance, including the public service broadcasting model. As interviewees have emphasized time and again, the new era is intended to be a genuine 'Syrian experience', encompassing both successes and failures.

Another promising category for countering divisive forces in the public sphere is private public interest media. These outlets are currently ready to start operating, but are waiting for their official licences from the Ministry of Information as well as for the funding and investment climate to improve. According to the Australian Public Interest Journalism Initiative, this category of media is defined as "a public good; it is the accurate, reliable news and journalism at the heart of public discussion, diversity of voice, open justice, accountability and informed decision-making. It educates, inspires, and brings together communities".[135] This sector includes media outlets that have returned from exile (Chapter 4.2.3), newly founded media, existing platforms, and broadcasters that have adapted their programming to the new situation (Chapter 4.2.4). Of the 480 private media outlets that have applied for a licence, many have a journalistic programme offering reliable, verified, and fact-checked news, which could effectively help combat propaganda, disinformation, and hate speech.

[135] PIJI, 2024, https://piji.com.au/about

It is important to bear in mind that after 50 years of regime propaganda, most Syrian media users are tired of disinformation and propaganda and have no interest in lies and fake news. Furthermore, Syrians have been forced to quickly acquire media literacy skills in the face of unprecedented waves of hate speech and disinformation in the past year. Accordingly, public interest media will likely be valued as allies in helping citizens cope with the challenges of the current transformation.

Given the new government's public commitment to press freedom and media pluralism, it is highly likely that the Ministry of Information will soon start granting more licences to private news outlets. Meanwhile, UN- and European-related organisations are preparing to launch a significant number of media support programmes. Together, these resources and legalisation could accelerate the transition to a more critical and pluralistic media landscape, testing the new rulers' tolerance and inclusivity.

As has been observed in previous transitional periods in countries such as Iraq, Libya, and Tunisia, it might only be a matter of time before new restrictions on press freedom are introduced. While such a backlash is to be expected, the quality of the process will be shaped by the extent to which civil society is involved in drafting new rules and regulations. It is therefore crucial to continue monitoring developments and ensure that media support programmes can adapt to changing circumstances, as it is not yet clear whether the new government is capable of handling a critical and pluralistic public sphere.

Much will depend on the power balance between ideological hardliners on one side of the new ruling elites and the pragmatic voices on the other side. These divisions can be found in the government, in each of the ministries, and even between local administrations, notably between Idlib, which is reputed to be conservative, and Damascus, considered more liberal. It would be beneficial for the media and the public sphere if the pragmatism observed among MOI staff during the field visit were to prevail and endure in the years to come.

Our research led us to the following policy recommendations:[136]

1. Syria Media & Disinformation Observatory

The Syria Media and Disinformation Observatory or a similar body would provide in-depth, interdisciplinary evaluation and analysis of media (social and traditional), including major influencers. The observatory will focus on trends in the media landscape, the dissemination of disinformation, and FIMI in Syria.

A team of social scientists, media researchers, psychologists, AI experts, and data analysts will deconstruct propaganda, disinformation, hate speech, and FIMI in order to provide the knowledge needed to effectively counter disinformation. It will conduct high-quality evaluations of Arabic media and social media channels and provide a clear analysis of disinformation trends and political implications. An Observatory can detect and neutralise disinformation and hate speech before it goes viral by combining social listening, rumor-tracking, and real-time narrative analysis. By leveraging algorithmic amplification and microtargeting on platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp, the Observatory ensures early, targeted engagement with at-risk audiences.

An Observatory can work to support local fact-checking initiatives by fostering joint and cross-border activities, in addition to dedicated training modules. This is especially relevant given the rapid rise in AI-generated content and the use of bots by various actors with the capacity and intention to cause havoc in the region. A Syria Media

[136] Additional Input for recommendations was provided by the team of the Media Literacy for the Mediterranean Initiative: Lana Kazkaz, Latif Sleibi, Guillaume Soto-Mayor and Alexander Karam

Observatory would also allow for the expansion of the use of the Open-Source Intelligence Toolkit (OSINT) to detect and analyse identity-based disinformation (IBD)-focused FIMI, thereby increasing situational awareness to better address the specificities of FIMI in the region.

Dialogue-powered truth-grounding could be an additional strategy for dissemination. Monthly "narrative listening circles" with journalists, youth, and community leaders to validate Observatory signals and surface local signposts (slogans, memes, and audio cues). Dominant narratives, high-risk claims, vulnerable audiences, and recommended constructive angles could thus be identified.

2. A Media Literacy Toolkit

Current toolkits and curricula on media or digital literacy are not tailored to the needs and context of Syrian society, particularly given the heavy local reliance on social media like Telegram and WhatsApp for news. A toolkit should be designed for all of Syria, while also accommodating regional and local specificities, such as dialects and different languages. In practice, this means addressing politically and socially significant issues such as conflict coverage, media bias, or regional/local corruption. The curriculum should use modern, locally relevant examples. Media bias should be explored across all formats —image, text, and video— and always through real-world case studies from Syria.

With these points and challenges in mind, the following guidelines should apply to ensure a sustainable design for the toolkit:

Clarify key distinctions: Explain the differences between propaganda, disinformation, bias and hate speech. Highlight the role of values, and bring nuance to the discourse ("all (social) media is bad").

Present the principle of a credibility spectrum: The landscape rarely allows for binary "true vs. false" distinctions. The toolkit must therefore teach participants how to assess context — the source of a story, the agenda of a platform, the intended audience. Recognise that credibility is gradual and contextual rather than absolute. Expose participants to a range of outputs (factual reporting, satire, misinformation, disinformation), and train users to notice "signposts" indicating validity or manipulation.

Develop 'signpost literacy': Provide simple checklists for spotting warning signs quickly (exaggerated headlines, anonymous sources, recycled imagery). Build habits that save time while enhancing awareness.

Ensure contextual relevance: Tailor examples to Syrian contexts while situating them within the global media ecosystem. Include modules on how disinformation operates locally and transnationally, showing the role of both domestic elites and foreign actors. Teach recognition of localised manipulation cues (e.g., slogans, memes, hashtags).

Introduce layered verification practices: Quick checks (language, source, date), contextual checks (publisher, audience, historical bias), and advanced verification methods (cross-referencing, reverse image search, fact-checker databases).

Integrate platform-specific awareness: Train users on how disinformation appears differently across platforms popular in Syria: WhatsApp forwards, Telegram channels, Instagram visuals, Facebook text posts, etc.

Embed behavioural awareness: Emphasise habits like pausing before sharing, checking sources, and recognising sensationalist tones. Focus on building resilient reflexes rather than rote knowledge.

3. Funding for Public Interest Media

A network of public interest media outlets spanning all regions of Syria will soon become an integral part of the country's evolving media landscape. It will comprise

former exile media outlets that have relocated to Syria, new online news platforms, and small local media outlets that have adapted to the new political environment.

Public interest media exist to provide Syrian citizens with reliable and relevant information. They monitor government decisions and report on social and societal developments that directly affect people's lives. Furthermore, small local media outlets cater to the needs of local communities, thereby enabling citizens to participate in local politics. Their work is based on journalistic ethics and professional standards.

Public interest media in Syria depend heavily on international funding to fulfil their missions, as the economic situation hardly offers alternative sources of income, such as paywalls, membership models, advertising, or services. International donors, such as the UN, the EU, embassies, and international development institutions and ministries, should coordinate and form alliances to provide long-term core funding for operational costs such as salaries, office rent, and equipment, with the aim of allowing this newly emerging sector to establish itself as a provider of truthful, reliable, and unbiased information.

4. Training and Cross-Regional Networking for Syrian Content Creators

The fragmentation of Syria has, unfortunately, led to journalists in different parts of the country becoming isolated from one another. Journalists in Latakia know little about the reality and working conditions faced by their colleagues in Idlib or Qamishli. Likewise, journalists in Aleppo know little about journalism and the media in Tartous or Suwaida. Increased networking between journalists and media outlets from different parts of the country will foster mutual understanding, helping to overcome subtle or overt hostilities in news coverage and public debate. Ideally, networking would be combined with training and the production and dissemination of content in all parts of the country via local media outlets.

As the most pressing training needs, we identified the following topics:

- Journalism ethics adapted to the Syrian environment and the special challenges that come with journalistic work in fragile contexts.
- Fact-checking, debunking, and countering disinformation.
- Distinctions in the field of disinformation: religious hate speech, jihadi propaganda, FIMI, and deep fakes.
- Advanced skills in the production of visual content (video and photography).
- Using AI in an ethical manner for the production of journalistic content.
- The role of platforms in amplifying or controlling the spread of disinformation.

Networked capacity building could be implemented as a series of **Media Labs:**

On-site labs: tailored to specific Syrian provinces and communities, adapted to dialects, cultural references, and case studies.

Cross-border peer labs: linking participants from different parts of the country to encourage, support and manage peer learning in all fields.

Virtual labs: in-person workshop should be combined with online mentoring and webinars.

The labs should generally provide capacity building and production grants for journalists and outlets. They should also include information about legal aid, relocation, and psychosocial support to keep media professionals safe in hostile environments.

5. Youth-Oriented Campaigning for Social Cohesion

Campaigns that promote social cohesion, peaceful coexistence, and unity should be designed in ways that appeal to youth in Syria. Campaigning could highlight common values between Syria's diverse groups —Sunnis, Christians, Druze, Kurds, Alawites— and address manipulative narratives that exploit religious symbols, vocabulary, and grievances. Target groups should be empowered to reinterpret cultural and religious heritage in inclusive ways. This is particularly important as in Syria, religion and ethnicity play a central role in community identity, and religious rhetoric is frequently exploited to deepen distrust, fear, and polarisation.

To make campaigning work among younger demographics, it is essential to share content through avenues that interest and reach youth audiences. This approach hinges on (1) leveraging unique channels and strategic partnerships with civil society and the private sector, (2) utilising youth-friendly platforms that are gaining popularity in Syria, such as Instagram, Telegram, WhatsApp, and local influencers, and (3) consistency in messaging as gaps or inconsistency create opportunities for malicious actors. Ultimately, there must be cultural and linguistic adaptation to the different local realities in Syria.

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is a German media assistance organisation that supports media outlets and journalists in regions undergoing political transformation or experiencing violent conflict. Such support may include, but is not limited to, training for journalists across various skills and topics, networking and exchange programmes, production grants, and business development initiatives for media managers. MiCT's media assistance aims to enhance and safeguard a critical, pluralistic, and inclusive public sphere through the promotion of media and capacity building for journalists and media organisations.

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