CHAPTER 5

Safety in Journalism in Syria

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Safety for journalists has never been more significant. Compelling evidence for such a statement can be found in developments all over the Middle East, and most of all in Syria.

Syrians started their revolution in 2011 chanting for freedom. They demanded the release of political prisoners, the reinstatement of political freedoms and freedom of speech. In short, they wanted a democratic life.

The unprecedented violence meted out by the Syrian regime, the support and direct intervention of Russia, and the inaction of the international community have made Syria the most dangerous country in the world for any human to live in. Doubly so for journalists and citizen journalists: Delivering the truth threatens all those carrying guns on all sides of the conflict.

Working in the media sector inside Syria nowadays has a great psychological impact on journalists, especially when their physical safety and life are at risk. To overcome the effects of this psychological impact in high-risk areas, it is absolutely crucial to have flexible safety procedures and emergency plans in place. Rozana Media, like many other independent media institutions in Syria, has experienced many incidents affecting its staff inside Syria. These examples show that safety is both a physical and a digital requirement.

Stories from the field

Examples of repression and physical reprisals abound.

Nineteen-year-old Yaser from Hama was arrested and tortured to death in prison by the regime. He was working for Rozana as a correspondent, reporting what was happening in his local area, when the regime found out about his activities and arrested him. He was detained for a couple of months before his body was returned to his family. Bashar, an engineering student and resident of Raqqa, worked as a correspondent when ISIS took over his city. Bashar unfortunately did not have a viable plan for protecting himself, either physically or digitally. ISIS raided his home, arrested him and seized his camera and laptop in 2014. Bashar's fate since then remains unknown.

Mohammad, another Rozana Media correspondent from Idlib, was shot dead by an armed group while covering news in his area.

The assassination of the journalist Naji Al-Jarf in 2015 in Gaziantep, Turkey, made it to the headlines. Naji edited a magazine tracking and exposing crimes by the regime and ISIS alike. He was hunted down through his social media accounts and killed. He was shot in downtown Gaziantep in the middle of the day, in a very crowded place, by a teenager on a motorbike. The Turkish authorities arrested his assassin a few months later. He was given a life sentence.

Naji did not follow basic safety procedures that he should have, being the journalist he was with the profile he had, and working on such sensitive matters in such a high-risk environment. He was very vocal on social media and his movements and location were easily traceable. This tragic situation could have been prevented if he had been more cautious about his movements and his communication with people and on social media.

Two citizen reporters who lived in Orpha, Turkey, were slaughtered by one of their former friends in their home, because of their work. They both fled their hometown of Raqqa when it fell under ISIS control. Both were open about their work in documenting the crimes of ISIS and the regime. Their assassinations were linked to ISIS. They

were both tracked through their social media postings, which revealed their location.

One local media group received threats from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and was forced to withdraw an article it had published containing criticism of the armed Syrian opposition.

Safety inside Syria

Saad, who lives in Homs and works as a freelance correspondent for several news agencies, opened a malicious link on Skype. His device froze and started to do things on its own, his emails and social media accounts were hacked.

Mohammad was a reporter working on the frontline in Idlib during a major opposition offensive to capture the strategic regime base of Wadi Al Dayfe. Mohammad says: "The concept of safety for journalists is a new concept for us. We do not have a thorough understanding of the steps to be taken to ensure our safety. However, while covering news I wear a helmet and a bulletproof vest, although I know these devices do not protect me 100%, especially under the conditions in which I operate. It is more important for me to hide my personal views so the fighters won't cause me harm."

Omar, who worked for the Union of Revolutionaries in Deirezzour, was arrested by ISIS because of a post he published on Facebook. He published a picture of a child stoning the bodies of fighters who had killed ISIS members. He warned against rising hatred. His intention was to raise awareness of the dangers of such incidents. He was released later and left for Turkey.

Muhammad al-Hamed was in prison for 5 months. After his release, he needed about 50 days to leave the country with his family to escape from ISIS. He endured difficult moments that he may not forget in his lifetime. Even though he is far away from Syria he has been hesitant about recounting his experiences in the ISIS prison, out of fear for his family who are still close to ISIS controlled areas. Mohammad lost his archive and the results of his work during his arrest, so he remains in a very vulnerable position.

Digital and personal safety policy

It is under these circumstances that numerous safety programs have been organized to support Syrian media organizations. Hundreds of journalists and citizen reporters have been trained in personal and digital safety by various international organizations.

A safety policy was developed and put into use to provide a modicum of security to Syrians working in the media sector. Keeping them abreast of real-time news and updates is one way of helping them stay safer. They also received training and special courses in personal safety. Syrian media institutions follow international journalistic ethics and place great importance on protecting the safety and security of their sources, especially those involved in investigative journalism. A special procedure is followed by many Syrian media organizations to respond to the arrest/apprehension of any of their staff.

Marwan lives in Turkey and works for a Syrian media organization. He received online threats from ISIS. The messages said they would track him down and kill him. Subsequently, a special plan was put in place to secure him and ensure his safety.

M.F. lives in Damascus. One day he was arrested by the regime because they suspected he was delivering information to an opposition media organization abroad. An emergency plan to secure all his online accounts was implemented immediately by this organization, so that he would be protected from death under torture. The regime thus could not access his information to prove that he was working as a correspondent for this media organization.

Journalism carries a very high responsibility in the general fight for freedom of expression in a place like Syria today. No story in the entire world warrants the death of journalists. Destiny, chance or luck play a big role in keeping us alive. But sometimes following safety regulations diligently can also help journalists survive – and do their job of fighting to deliver the truth in the most dangerous fields of all.