

Fighting misinformation helps Social Cohesion and Early Recovery in Syria

Luis Miguel Bueno Padilla, EU Arabic Spokesperson
for the Middle East and North Africa:

"Supporting free, independent media is essential if we want to
help Syrians have a better future"



Executive Summary

The best recipe against mis-disinformation is access to reliable, independent information. Access to diverse and reliable information is the only sustainable answer to disinformation. This makes people less receptive to disinformation. This requires measures to guarantee the survival of quality journalism. In the Syrian context independent media are a driving force for rebuilding Syrian society.

By preserving independence, Syrian media is trusted to promote dialogue, providing a platform for diverse voices and fosters a culture of critical thinking and public debate, the media acts as a catalyst for inclusive recovery and sustainable development. It lays the groundwork for a resilient, democratic, and prosperous future. Donors, partners and Syrian media must prioritise developing and protecting independent media to ensure its role as a pillar of Syria's recovery and transformation.

This policy paper aims to guide stakeholders in leveraging the independent media's potential to significantly impact Syria's early recovery phase, advocating for a strategic, long-term investment in media infrastructure and capabilities.

Introduction

As major military operations diminish, the early recovery phase becomes crucial, requiring cooperation between local and international stakeholders to rebuild infrastructure, inclusive governance, and social networks. In Syria, this phase aims to reintegrate communities and integrate regional economies.

Early recovery efforts focus on enhancing local communities' resilience, repairing relationships among societal factions, organisational bodies, and local authorities, and promoting regional integration.

Research shows that locally-led recovery initiatives often yield more sustainable and effective outcomes. Studies by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)¹ emphasise that empowering local communities to lead recovery efforts builds long-term resilience and fosters more inclusive and stable societies. Moreover, the World Bank² has documented that community-driven development projects often achieve greater success in post-conflict settings by addressing local needs more accurately and fostering a sense of ownership and accountability.

These initiatives emphasise local leadership in recovery projects, supported by the Demand-Side approach, which guides communities toward self-recovery, unlike the supply-side approach, which relies on donors and international actors.

¹United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). "Building Resilience in Post-Conflict Settings." Available at: [UNDP](#)

²World Bank. "Community-Driven Development in Post-Conflict Situations." Available at: [World Bank](#)

Such a shift prioritises local resource activation with measured international support, reducing reliance on external aid. When donors exist and are willing to contribute to early recovery processes, they should oversee projects based on efficacy, impact, and accountability in resource management and ethical execution, ensuring long-term community and regional stability.

Role of Independent Media in **Early Recovery**

Independent media play a fundamental role in Early Recovery in various ways and are crucial, acting as a bridge for dialogue and monitoring the recovery process. By focusing on local empowerment, measured international support, and robust media involvement, Syria's early recovery phase can lay a foundation for lasting peace and stability. Below, we discuss how support for independent media enhances social cohesion and accountability, promotes democratic engagement and counters autocratic tendencies.

Restoring Social Cohesion

Independent media fosters understanding and bridges communal divides by highlighting shared experiences and acts of solidarity among Syrians. Independent media not only promotes transparency and accountability but also facilitates reconciliation by providing a platform for diverse voices and narratives. This shared narrative is essential for rebuilding a unified national identity and facilitating collaborative local recovery efforts. In particular, independent media can help in social cohesion through:

■ **Promoting Civil Peace:**

The media plays a significant role in cultivating a culture of civil peace in Syria. It reminds citizens of the benefits of political peace and highlights the detrimental effects of division, fragmentation, and prolonged conflict. By broadcasting stories of reconciliation and cooperation, the media can help shift public perception towards the advantages of unity and stability.

■ **Facilitating Political Outcomes:**

Media should actively pressure the implementation of political peace agreements and foster public discourse around these outcomes. This includes highlighting the importance of building a modern state founded on principles of democracy and human rights. By providing a platform for diverse voices and informed debate, the media can help ensure that political processes are transparent and inclusive, contributing to a more democratic society.

■ **Ensuring Accountability in Peace Processes:**

Media must vigilantly monitor the implementation of peace processes, focusing on justice, reparations, and accountability. This involves scrutinising all elements of the peace agreement and advocating for its comprehensive execution based on a real societal foundation. By investigating and reporting on the progress and challenges of peace initiatives, the media can hold stakeholders accountable and promote a just and enduring peace.

Enhancing Accountability

Independent media serve as a watchdog, crucial for exposing corruption and mismanagement, which is the purpose of good journalism. Building a society in which the powerful are accountable to the public, where relevant information is shared and explained, where there is space for democratic initiative and where citizens can exchange opinions, is promoted through an independent and diverse media landscape, with quality journalism adhering to ethical standards. In particular, media can help in:

- Hold stakeholders accountable, ensures transparency and resource utilisation efficiency, garnering public trust and facilitating effective governance.
- Provide an external eye on the performance of projects and organisations. This becomes crucial as the media is the first to have a cross-geography presence and collaborations.

Promoting inclusive government and countering authoritarian tendencies

Despite the distant prospect of a political resolution, independent media provides a platform for diverse voices and fosters a culture of critical thinking and public debate. This is vital to prevent the resurgence of authoritarian governance. In particular, it helps in building inclusive governance.

Without strong, independent media, authoritarian de facto powers in all regions can easily manipulate information, shaping public discourse to their advantage. Independent media is a critical bulwark against such tendencies by providing a platform for dissent and critical viewpoints. It reinforces democratic principles such as freedom of speech and the essential need for accountability in governance, thereby safeguarding the democratic process and promoting civic engagement.

This is critical as prospects for democracy are fading, and hopes for full implementation of UN Security Council resolution 2254 are intensively shrinking.

■ Platform for Diverse Voices:

In environments where authoritarian de facto powers often constrain access to information and design narratives, independent media emerges as a crucial counterbalance. It offers a space where a wide array of voices, particularly those critical of the government, marginalised communities, ethnic and religious minorities, and opposition groups, can be expressed freely. By presenting multiple perspectives, independent media plays a pivotal role in cultivating a more inclusive society and preventing the monopolisation of power by a few.

■ Fostering Critical Thinking and Public Debate:

Independent media is unafraid to confront challenging issues, expose government corruption and human rights violations, and hold all stakeholders accountable. This proactive approach stimulates critical thinking and nurtures a culture of public debate. Independent media empowers citizens to actively participate in their governance by equipping them with the ability to critically evaluate issues and engage in meaningful discussions. A well-informed citizenry is the cornerstone of a robust democracy, enabling people to make thoughtful decisions about their collective future.

■ **Being an alternative:**

Being an alternative to the narratives propagated by, for example, Russian and Iranian media, which may seek to undermine early recovery programs to advance their own agendas. Independent media provide diverse perspectives and unbiased reporting, serving as a vital source of information that challenges misinformation and ensures transparency. By championing independent journalism, we empower societies to make informed decisions and resist external manipulation, safeguarding the integrity of early recovery efforts against foreign influence.

Recommendations:

For Donors, stakeholders and Syrian media:

Promote and apply partnership: The partnership approach is the key to attaining more equality, diminishing dependent relations, and working towards localisation results and harmonious and effective cooperation.

For Donors:

Challenges and Considerations

Journalists in Syria face significant risks, while the context remains highly volatile. The lack of safety includes threats to personal safety and restrictive measures by authoritarian elements. Balancing the need for critical reporting with security concerns is essential. Socio-economic and political differences have been perpetuated by state, and private (profit or for-non-profit alike) partisan media and led to hate speech, often targeting women and various social, political, religious and ethnic groups with discriminatory rhetoric. Many media and social media (SM) channels produce misinformation, fake news as well as hate speech supporting stigmatising and discriminatory stereotyping. As such, the influence of responsible and independent media remains one of the most important pillars for re-building a society with cohesiveness and respect for human rights.

Given the significant influence exerted by external state-sponsored media, particularly from Iranian and Russian sources, donors should continue and even enhance their funding to independent Syrian media. This support is crucial for maintaining a balanced media landscape and ensuring the Syrian public can access unbiased and diverse viewpoints.

1.

Strategic Media Support:

Efforts should not be wasted, and the long-term vision should be supported by continuity of rational efforts. Donors should be fed with and gather evidence of media achievements to build on to strengthen the stability and capacities of local independent media to produce high-quality, credible content that can be a trusted alternative to the narratives propagated by Iranian and Russian media outlets. This includes funding for advanced journalistic training, technology upgrades, and developing content that resonates with local and national audiences.

2.

Integrated Project Funding:

Encourage funding models integrating civil society and media projects, ensuring that grants and resources are designed to support projects involving CSOs and media houses. This could help create more cohesive and comprehensive approaches to tackling governance, human rights, and public accountability.

3.

Support Collaborative Platforms:

Fund and facilitate platforms that unite civil society organisations and independent media. These collaborations can amplify the impact of advocacy campaigns, disseminate critical information more effectively, and engage a wider audience. Joint initiatives could include forums for policy dialogue, shared training workshops, or co-developed public awareness campaigns that leverage the strengths of both sectors.

4.

Supporting Media Self-Regulation:

Strengthening media institutions like the Syrian Journalists Association and adhering to ethical guidelines ensures journalism maintains high standards of integrity and professionalism, enhancing public trust and credibility.

5.

Promoting Media Literacy:

To further mitigate the influence of external media, donors should also invest in media literacy programs that educate the Syrian public on critically assessing media sources. This would empower individuals to discern bias and propaganda, reducing the impact of external narratives on public opinion and fostering a more discerning and informed populace.

6.

Enhancing Regional Outreach:

Expanding the reach of independent media to cover broader geographic areas within Syria ensures that the independent narrative reaches even those in remote or underserved regions, where external media might otherwise dominate information channels.

7.

Network Building:

Assist CSOs in strengthening current and building networks and coalitions that advocate for media freedom and support a sustainable independent media ecosystem. Facilitating connections with international media support networks can also provide local organisations with global perspectives and additional resources.

8.

Capacity Building for CSOs:

Provide targeted support to civil society organisations that focus on media support, such as legal aid for journalists, research on media freedom, and advocacy for press rights. Enhancing these organisations' capacity enables them to protect and promote independent media better.

These steps would provide Syrian independent media with the tools and capabilities necessary to uphold a pluralistic media environment and ensure the Syrian public can access truthful, diverse, and balanced information. This is essential for maintaining sovereignty over the national narrative and supporting democratic governance and social cohesion in the face of external media pressures.

For Syrian Media:

- 1. Enhance Collaboration:**
Establish networks for sharing resources, training, and information among media organisations to strengthen the media landscape.
- 2. Focus on Inclusive Reporting:**
Ensure representation of diverse community perspectives to foster greater inclusivity and comprehensive coverage of recovery efforts.
- 3. Adopt Advanced Technologies:**
Explore and invest in any feasible innovation, including utilising modern technologies to enhance journalistic practices and content delivery, ensuring wider and more effective dissemination of crucial information. Specifically, focus on responsible and smart use of artificial intelligence (AI) when it helps improve both effectiveness and efficiency.
- 4. Make work and achievement visible:**
Syrian media and CSOs should feed stakeholders and donors with evidence of achievements, bringing audiences' voices to the forefront. They should help contextualise change, opportunities, and challenges and, in so doing, justify the change local independent media are and need to undergo in order to keep producing high-quality, credible content that can be trusted across lines.

About Free Press Unlimited

Access to reliable information is a human right. That is why we, [Free Press Unlimited](#), protect press freedom and the safety of journalists together with over 300 local media partners in more than 50 countries. Together with them, we work on our mission to make independent news and information available to all. Because people deserve to know.

Contact

Weesperstraat 3
1018 DN Amsterdam
T: +31 20 8000400
E: info@freepressunlimited.org
W: freepressunlimited.org

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