

SYRIA

The war and before

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Three young Syrian journalists, recently trained in investigative reporting, are ‘drinking Arabic coffee and talking animatedly’ in a café in Damascus. What are they talking about? What Arab people are worried about. ‘[N]ot only are these journalists talking, they are investigating and, more importantly, publishing’.

Such was the scene depicted by Rana Sabbagh, director of Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ), in a famous article (Sabbagh, 21 June 2010), which I cite at the start of my *Investigative Journalism in the Arab World: Issues and Challenges* (Bebawi, 2016).

Alas, as I go on to note, Sabbagh wrote another article in December 2014 wherein he described that very place in which those three Syrian investigative journalists had not long before been exploring the possibilities of their new-found power as ‘a graveyard for journalists’ (Sabbagh, *Syria: Inside the World’s Deadliest Place for Journalists*, 3 December 2014).

Before the 2011 civil war in Syria, there was a slow yet notable emergence of an investigative reporting movement which witnessed the publication of some investigations that dealt with grassroots issues. It was within that environment that those three Syrian journalists described previously were feeling a sense of power and momentum. Yet since the start of the conflict, such possibilities have been somewhat muted, thus reflecting the volatile politics of the region – a region Sabbagh describes as ‘moving sands’ (16 June 2013).

Not much has changed since 2011 in terms of the political, economic and social environment that journalists are operating under in Syria, and the conflict drags on. Yet there have been some individual attempts, notwithstanding the challenges the conflict offers, where we see a rise of an investigative reporting practice that is Syrian in nature. This chapter will cover this journey from the rise of investigative journalism in the Arab world more generally to the start of investigative reporting in Syria specifically before and during the conflict. This is based on the observation of training sessions; ARIJ Forum discussions from 2015–2019 and interviews with trainers, reporters, editors and board members of various organisations involved.

Investigative journalism in Syria before the conflict

Investigative reporting in the Arab world is not new. In the past, there have been individual investigations that were carried out in the 1950s and 1960s by a few reporters such as Mohammad Hassanain Heikal, an Egyptian journalist who took the position of editor-in-chief of the Cairo-based newspaper *Al-Ahram* and who was focused on developing investigative reporting by training journalism graduates. Such initiatives were scattered across the Arab region and can be best described as individual and isolated and hence not sustainable.

However, now that some media organisations in Arab countries understand the importance investigative journalism can have in the region, they are making it a priority. This has been occurring across both big media organisations and small. Al Jazeera (AJ), for example, announced the establishment of its investigative unit in June 2010. The director general at the time, Wadah Khanfar, saw it as a major move for the network when other media institutions were stepping away from investigative reporting. He states that it was important to AJ because the established investigative unit was seen to ‘not only to expand the breadth of . . . reporting, but also to drive further into stories for deeper narratives’ (Press release, 29 June 2010). The unit dealt with both regional and international issues with a pan-Arab and global reach. However AJ’s investigative unit ran a different operation to that of smaller local investigative units and programmes that operate within national boundaries. Many of these smaller units were established through the Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism, launched in Amman, Jordan, as the first institutionalised investigative journalism training operation across the Arab world.

ARIJ was set up in 2015 through a Danish-Arab partnership, whereby a committee of Foreign Ministry officials from Denmark and members of the Danish Investigative Journalism Association came to Jordan to interview over a hundred journalists from Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. The Danish Ministry officials and the interviewed journalists came back with the suggestion to create a network through the establishment of ARIJ. The allocation of funds came through the Danish Parliament for ARIJ (Sabbagh, 16 June 2013). ARIJ was established as a pilot in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon and, as a result, a few Arab investigative units were set up with the assistance of ARIJ.

The emergence of investigative journalism was not a result of the Arab Spring. ARIJ was established before the protests of 2011. In fact, the development of investigative reporting in some Arab countries was more prominent prior to the Arab Spring. Elsewhere, on the other hand, investigative reporting was easier to pursue as a result of the political changes that came about due to the Arab spring. In Jordan, to illustrate, where protests did not lead to a leadership change but led to political reform, investigative journalism which only focused on social and environmental issues went on to address political matters such as corruption and election fraud. In Tunisia, investigative reporting was basic prior to the revolution in 2011 but flourished after the Arab Spring

(Bebawi, 2016). As for Syria, investigative reporting was slowly rising before the civil war but continued with difficulty during the conflict, as will be discussed in the following sections.

ARIJ began its operation in the Arab region in Jordan and then went on to expand to Syria, yet the possibility of training and doing investigative stories in Syria at the time was limited due to its strong political leadership. However, ARIJ was allowed to train investigative reporters in Syria as long as they avoided political investigations on corruption issues (Sabbagh, 16 June 2013). As a result, ARIJ began work in Syria and, according to Sabbagh, 'Syria was our success story' (16 June 2013). Sabbagh explains:

We were very transparent, every time I go to Syria I would visit the Minister of Information and every month I would send him a report on what we were working on, and who was taking money. So all went well in Syria

(16 June 2013).

Prior to the Syrian conflict, therefore, there were a number of investigations that were conducted as a result of a few Syrian journalists getting training by ARIJ in investigative journalism. One example of a successful investigation was conducted by a young journalist in Syria on local hospitals that were being negligent. At the time, trainers from ARIJ who were working with him were aware that this was a sensitive topic, yet they were curious to know whether the story could be published (Bebawi, 2016). The investigation was published and resulted in an intervention from the government, and a local commission was set up to deal with the matter. Anders Jerichow, who was an ARIJ board member, believes that this Syrian journalist 'paved the way for Syrian colleagues' (6 December 2014). In Syrian journalism, this story created a small 'media revolution', as suddenly Syrian reporters realised that they could hold official authorities accountable on local issues that affected the people (Jerichow, 6 December 2014). More examples such as this one came to light; however, the recent Syrian war which began with the Arab Spring protests in 2011 interrupted this briefly, but it slowly began to rise again during the conflict.

Investigative journalism in Syria during the conflict

At the opening of a national workshop on investigative journalism, held on 25 May 2015, co-organised with the Syrian National Committee for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) promoting investigative journalism in Syria, Information Minister Omran al-Zoubi said: 'The extraordinary circumstances in Syria stress that investigative journalism is a need now more than any time before' in light of the various forms of misinformation and falsification that have targeted the Syrians since day one of the crisis (Said, 2015). He was especially focused on calling on

Syrian journalists to dive deep into social issues and touch on the daily needs and suffering of the Syrian people to better contribute to the efforts to protect citizens against the ‘crisis opportunists’ (Said, 2015). He had in February that year called for establishing an investigative journalism unit at every information and media institution to increase focus on social and daily life issues of concern to citizens (Said, 2015).

A few institutions have been established in Syria focused on investigative journalism which have set the basis for this. Notably, the Syrian Investigative Reporting for Accountability Journalism (SIRAJ) was launched in 2016. It was established by three journalists, Mohamed Bassiki, Ali Alibrahim and Ahmed Haj Hamdo, making it the first organisation in Syria for investigative journalism. Without funding, and working in exile, these journalists trained more than 30 local reporters on investigative journalism on a voluntary basis. Since then, SIRAJ has become a collective of 25 Syrian investigative reporters working from within and outside Syria, in cooperation with media partners from the Arab region who supported them with funding and publishing outlets. Its mission was to ‘produce investigative reports about Syria by Syrian journalists, as well as to provide training to Syrian journalists, media activists and journalists on investigative methodologies and its development in the region and the world’ (GIJN, 2019). They stress that investigations need to be carried out by Syrians themselves; Syrian reporters must have a local investigative voice.

As a training and publishing organisation, SIRAJ saw the need for stories and facts to be uncovered with the aim of enhancing accountability, revealing ‘secrets in a professional and unbiased manner that are not linked to political or governmental bodies, especially after the country descended into anarchy and political, economic and social corruption increased’ (GIJN, 2019). In a conversation with Majdoleen Hassan from the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN), Mohamed Bassiki notes that:

There was also a need for accurate and authoritative information about the situation in Syria for people living in the country as well as for a global audience. There wasn’t a Syrian media organization that could accommodate Syrian investigative journalists able to write for publications inside Syria and publications outside of the country that could benefit from local expertise. It helps motivate local journalists to continue reporting. Death threats and the fear of arrest and imprisonment prompted a large number of Syrian journalists to flee to neighbouring countries and various places in the world, while others stayed inside the country. We worked on re-networking with those who are inside the country and those who are abroad.

(GIJN, 2019)

Another notable player in the rise of investigative journalism in Syria is an organisation called Syria Direct, which is an organisation that focuses on

independent and in-depth reporting. It was established in 2013 and aims to cover 'key military developments and track the country's shifting politics, province by province, to explain news as it unfolds, placing a particular focus on the individuals driving events on the ground' (Syria Direct, accessed 8 December 2019).

The establishment of such organisations that train and publish investigative journalism in Syria reflects a need to focus on establishing a tradition of this form of reporting, especially in times of conflict where issues such as chemical attacks and refugees are at the forefront of the conflict. Reports coming out of international news organisations often reflect global or national policies, whereas investigative reports coming out of local and independent Syrian journalists are more focused on covering issues that deal with grassroots issues of interest to the Syrian people. Such topics include smuggling, crimes conducted in Syrian refugee camps, corruption and bad conditions in hospitals, marriage of young girls and contamination within the environment (SIRAJ, 2019).

One example of an investigation during the Syrian civil war is one published by Daraj Media entitled "'Money" and "Propaganda Activities" Attract Children to "Al-Nusra" and Its Affiliates in Idlib', published 17 October 2018 (Daraj Media, 2018). As the title states, the investigation explores the different ways in which certain hardline Islamist factions recruit children in the Idlib area. By interviewing 'child' soldiers, the investigation found that '15 to 30 percent of all the children recruited [as soldiers] in Syria' were under the age of 15, tempting them with salaries and aid to their families (Daraj Media, 2018).

Another example of investigations carried out during the conflict is 'Homes of Syrian War Refugees Expropriated', by Mokhtar Al-Ibrahim and Ahmad Haj Hamdo, on Al Iqtisadi, 9 November 2014. An analysis of this investigation (Bebawi, 2016) looked into the impact this story had, which found that war profiteers were selling the properties of refugees who had fled the conflict using fraudulent documents. The reporters conducted the investigation by following and documenting the process the profiteers went through to sell the refugees' properties, tracking down the steps they would follow to forge a power of attorney (POA) which allowed them to sell the properties. The investigative process involved daily tours to Syrian districts, searching through records of civil and housing directorates, the Ministry of Justice and courts in the provinces of Damascus and its countryside and Aleppo (Al-Ibrahim and Hamdo, 23 December 2014). During this process, they identified the gaps in the legal system which facilitated the process of fraud and aided the war merchants in selling the refugees' properties. What they also uncovered was that there was a large number of judges and lawyers who had also been directly involved in this network of fraud.

Such topics are hard to investigate as a result of strict areas of control and mobility, barriers to access to information and lack of skills in investigative reporting in the first place. They require local reporters from the inside who

know the system, the language and the issues that occur during conflict. Yet these local investigative reporters are not protected, and their investigations hit many roadblocks along the way. The following sections will discuss these challenges in relation to the processes of training and practice of investigative reporting in Syria through interviews conducted with Syrian investigative reporters and editors from SIRAJ and Syria Direct in November 2019.

Training investigative journalism in Syria

Training in investigative reporting is still relatively new in Syria, and a lot of the skills that are used are either improvised on the spot or self taught. One example of this is one Syrian journalist who was not able to attend a training session in Jordan due to the conflict and instead read published investigative stories on the ARIJ website that included the reporter's and coach's notes and the ARIJ training manual. This provided the Syrian journalist with enough information to conduct an investigation on the homes of Syrian war refugees that were expropriated, discussed previously. This Syrian journalist also learnt from one of his colleagues who had attended an ARIJ training session (Bebawi, 2016). Manar Rachwani, editor-in-chief of Syria Direct, notes that investigative reporting is new and that a model of investigative journalism that suits and works in the region is therefore necessary:

When we are talking about investigative reporting we are still talking about something new in the Arab world except when it comes maybe to having the necessary skills and acquiring the knowledge that is needed to produce high quality reports, and at the same time we talk about addressing some difficulties and overcoming problems that could face the journalist.

(Rachwani, 22 November 2019)

However, when training is provided, there are also some issues in the delivery of training because a traditional way of teaching is more common in the region. This has been noted in previous observations (Bebawi, 2016), where trainers and university lecturers have not necessarily worked as investigative reporters themselves and hence find it hard to provide practical-based training. Yet even after training is provided, there are not many opportunities for trained reporters to practice investigative reporting, so the skills are never truly developed. Rachwani comments on this:

What I noticed in the Arab World [is] that we don't understand the difference between training and lecturing. Many trainers till now go to the class . . . and they start giving us a talk or a lecture. It's not like about practice, it's not like about exercises and without practice people not only won't acquire the necessary skills from the beginning but

also, they might forget. Even if they managed to follow every step, and comprehend and to remember. But also after a while, without practicing, they usually forget. So this is one of the issues.

(22 November 2019)

Another issue that was noted during training sessions that were attended by the author is that trainers are usually from a non-Arab background or even a non-Syrian background, which makes it hard for the trainers to understand the intricacies, challenges and nature of doing investigative reporting specific to Syria, especially under conflict. Walid Al Noufal, from Syria Direct, notes that trainers are not Syrian, so they do not know enough about Syrian issues, and they also do not know enough about the nature of the situation within conflict areas in Syria (23 November 2019). This makes it very hard for Syrian journalists to indeed know how to deal with challenges and obstacles along the way, especially when conducting training from a Western perspective and narrative. Al Noufal notes that there needs to be more focus when training in Syria particularly, and in the Arab world in general, on developing skills that are a mix of a Western and Arab model. He also stresses the need for trainers to be from the same region the trainees are working in (Al Noufal, 23 November 2019).

However, even in non-conflict zones, Arab journalism has slowly been detaching from traditional methods of reporting, yet such traditional forms of doing journalism still remain very strongly in place when training for investigative reporting that requires a more detailed methodological and systematic approach. Ahmed Haj Hamdo, an investigative reporter for SIRAJ, talks in Arabic about what needs to be developed when adopting a systematic approach that works in an Arab environment of reporting:

We have to adopt systematic work to conduct investigations. The best we can do is to train Arab journalists that investigative reporting is not an ad hoc approach – we need to have a clear plan on how to approach the investigation like who will our sources be, what angle are we investigating from, what information is available to us, what are our minimum or maximum expectations. A systematic approach to investigative reporting will ensure the development of Arab investigative reporting that can be described as more professional using evidence that is documented. To add, we also need to develop training on how to use open sources such as social media – we need to learn how to utilise them. We also need to learn more about media ethics, how to deal with war survivors from trauma which are sensitive issues in our area.

(23 November 2019).

One other aspect that was noted in training sessions attended by the author is that it was difficult for reporters to understand the difference between fact

and emotion. Investigative stories were built on a particular issue that journalists were passionate about, and whilst this makes for a strong and compelling driver towards uncovering facts, it could also be an obstacle to focusing on new findings or changing the angles available that come up during the investigation process. Trainers found themselves constantly having to remind trainees that they need to put their emotions aside and instead focus on dealing with facts and data that are provided to them as a basis for their investigations. Hamdo says in relation to this:

The skills we need to develop as Arab investigative journalists are learning how to plan and develop a story, and not just go out and report based on emotion since it is a systematic form of journalism. Also journalists need to develop technical skills for storytelling such as multimedia and podcasts. We also need skills to create infographics so if data becomes available then Arab reporters can ensure that their investigations are evidenced with infographics, statistics and tables.
(23 November 2019)

One notable problem facing training investigative journalists is that there are very few training sources and learning materials in Arabic. Trainees not only find it hard to access these sources but also find it difficult to understand other international exemplars of investigative reports. Rachwani says in relation to this:

It's so important in the case of the Arab world maybe being familiar with the international sources and this requires English language in some cases. It is not a secret that the quality of education is deteriorating all over the world, so also we have sometimes to be aware and know about the basic math related to the data we are dealing with.
(22 November 2019)

A few training organisations, such as ARIJ, set out to provide English [language] training courses specific to investigative reporters and also online English-language material for those who could not attend these courses in person, which is a clear indication that there is an awareness of the need to address access to English courses. Having said that, there have been a few attempts to provide translations to Arabic of sources and material that could be of use to Arab investigative journalists.

Practicing investigative journalism in Syria

The practice of investigative journalism has its separate set of challenges to that of training, although there are commonalities. One specific challenge Syrian reporters face when working on investigations is adapting to obstacles they face

as a result of the conflict. This presents Syrian investigative reporters with an added layer of difficulty to what they are already enduring as Arab journalists. Al Noufal, from Syria Direct, notes that in the Arab world, there are differences between conflict zones and regions that have more stability, so the nature of investigative work would differ between the two areas. In countries with stability, it would be easier for the investigative journalist to go to the field and gather information and double-check the data and even gain access to government documents. Working in conflict zones is harder, he says, because reporters are a target and because they are working from afar. He states that '[m]ost investigative reporters are working outside conflict zones – even the reporters working from the inside, their mobility is limited as they are facing more obstacles to their work' (Al Noufal, 23 November 2019). According to Hamdo, co-founder of SIRAJ, the right to access information is one of those obstacles. He states in Arabic:

In conflict areas we cannot reach every part and there is a lot of information that is restricted from us. When we work on money tracking, company contracts or agreements, as a result of my training in data analysis, I can now access some information. At this stage in the Arab world we still do not have access to information. . . . We need a law or method that allows us to get data or documents we can actually obtain. FOI laws exist but on paper only, and when we need to apply it, it is futile.

(23 November 2019)

Another issue is the need for the protection of journalists. There have been a few funded initiatives for increasing awareness of Arab journalists of how to protect themselves in conflict zones, yet war zones in the region do not necessarily provide 'the full scope of protection granted to civilians under international humanitarian law' since 'Article 79 formally states that journalists engaged in dangerous professional missions in zones of armed conflict are civilians' (ICRC, 2019). Hamdo stresses the need to protect journalists in Syria:

In Syria, journalists are killed, journalists are jailed, journalists are kidnapped in exchange of monetary ransoms, journalists are shamed, attacked with hate speech against them and their families, journalists are subject to untrue accusations when people don't like what they journalist says or does. How can we ask an Arab journalist to operate at a professional standard if we cannot guarantee some level of protection?

(23 November 2019)

There is also the global issue of fake news that is affecting media around the world, and it becomes even a bigger issue in conflict zones such as Syria. The

number of fabricated stories on Syria circulating the internet make it very hard for Syrian investigative reporters to operate within an environment of truth-telling. Rachwani states in regard to this:

The most important part also, because of the internet, there is widespread belief in conspiracy theory in the Arab world – we need to be careful about this information, about tracking the sources of the information, and how we can verify, triangulate, not to be the victim of rumours, lies, etc. Especially now we are talking about well-produced lies.

(22 November 2019)

The stories behind the stories laying out the journey that journalists go through to get accurate data and facts is reflective of the reality of the conflict, so not only is publishing stories a major impediment to initiating an investigation in the first place, but the dangers along the way could also act as a deterrent. This is a known fact – so nothing new there. However, one surprise is learning about the degree to which society itself is a major obstacle. Rachwani comments on this:

In addition to the political and security issues, we have the social concerns. Not every issue can be addressed sometimes for religious obstacles, social problems, so we have to be – I would say – smarter. We have to be more creative in addressing these issues: how to show we are submitting a problem that needs to be solved and needs to be addressed instead of challenging the society as we challenge their values or their beliefs. Especially these are deeply rooted beliefs and religious beliefs in general.

(22 November 2019)

Society has therefore been a hindrance to investigative reporters in many countries surrounding Syria, such as Jordan, where people see what the conflict has done to the Syrian people and therefore do not support any form of uncovering the truth, as investigative reporters are seen to be rocking the boat.

Generally, Arab investigative reporters aim to facilitate change and achieve impact, and in some cases in conflict areas, such as Syria and Iraq, investigative journalism can address war-related issues and set a base for building possibilities for political reform post-conflict. Al Noufal, from Syria Direct, suitably concludes in his interview that in conflict zones, there are many violations to human rights, and there is also a lot of corruption. Daily news reporting is often not sufficient to uncover these violations, so investigative reporting has the ability to uncover these violations and corruption. He states:

‘[T]here is limited investigative journalism practice in Syria so this is what made me become an investigative reporter: in order to document the violations and corruption cases taking place’ (Al Noufal, 23 November 2019). This explains why, despite the challenges facing Syrian journalists in general and investigative reporters specifically, there remains a determination to uncover as many stories as possible in conflict zones.

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