



Journalist Fellowship Paper

After Assad: roles and risks for exiled journalists navigating return to Syria

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Preface

In this project, I will use the term “exiled” to refer to anyone who has left Syria and lived abroad, whether by force or by choice.

From the outset of my fellowship, I knew how difficult it would be to capture the layered experiences of Syrian journalists – some exiled, some returned, some still contemplating the decision. Carrying their voices is a responsibility I feel deeply.

Writing about this now, between April and August 2025, has been especially challenging because the situation on the ground shifts almost daily. Inevitably, the realities and stories captured here will have evolved by the time of publication.

My aim is to convey the voices of the Syrians who spoke to me with as much care and accuracy as possible, while acknowledging that any account of a moving landscape can only ever be a partial snapshot.

Introduction

It was 5am on 8 December 2024 when my father sent me a voice note to say rebels had surrounded Damascus. By 10am, the Syrian capital had surrendered to the transitional rebel forces.

Analysts describe the offensive that dethroned the Assad regime as a “[lightning operation](#)” that took 11 days.¹ The rebel group Haya’t Tahrir al Sham, which had governed the North Western part of Syria [since 2019](#), advanced rapidly, seizing Damascus and much of the country.² Their actions brought an end to more than 50 years of authoritarian rule, 14 years of civil war and conflict, the forced displacement of [14 million people](#), and the enforced disappearance of at least [112,414 Syrians](#).^{3, 4}

We grew up with a slogan repeated endlessly by the state: “Our leader, forever, Hafez al-Assad”. Forever ended on the day the impossible became possible. A regime that had, for generations, meticulously instilled fear in Syrian collective memory was rendered powerless. Families of the forcibly disappeared flocked to now-opened prisons to search for missing relatives. On Instagram, journalist friends shared stories from inside detention centres long sealed from public view. As surreal as it was to see these spaces for the first time, it was equally striking to witness uncensored and unsanctioned reporting by Syrian journalists.

¹ Al-Khalidi, S. & Azhari, T. (2024) ‘Syria rebels celebrate in captured Homs, set sights on Damascus’, Reuters, 7 December [online]. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-rebels-celebrate-captured-homs-set-sights-damascus-2024-12-07/>

² International Crisis Group (2024) [Containing transnational jihadists in Syria’s Idlib](#). Crisis Group.

³ USA for UNHCR (2025) [Syria refugee crisis explained](#). 13 March.

⁴ Syrian Network for Human Rights (2024) [‘2024’](#).

My own homecoming

After almost 13 years living in Turkey, my compulsion to return to Syria and see the change for myself was immediate and inescapable. I arranged a reporting trip with the *Wall Street Journal*. While there, I encountered two dominant reactions to the end of the Assad era: unrestrained celebration, marked by open political expression, and the manifestation of deep, delayed grief as the hidden tools of repression and torture were laid bare.

Entering a former intelligence prison in Damascus, I was struck by the smell of mould, human waste, and blood – a smell that became familiar to the many basements we visited. Accompanied by a rebel and former prisoner, who recounted his experiences as we moved through the cells, we began to piece together how the regime functioned. I read internal communications between security branches and held the abandoned records of the former government in my own hands, just days after they had been left behind. The residue of a fire set in an apparent attempt to erase evidence hung in the air.

Months later, in Oxford, I was plagued by nightmares of those basements. Although my experience in Syria had been profoundly affirming, the fear that the country could slide back into horror lingered. At the time, I didn't have the language to describe these feelings. I did not know they were part of a broader process of homecoming shared by many exiles.

For years, I had compartmentalised my feelings about Syria and the home I left behind. Today, while I have regained a sense of agency over my work, my movement and my identity, questions remain about how to integrate my Syrian identity with the life I built in exile. This tension is now part of the reality many Syrians are navigating.

Among the 10 exiled Syrian journalists I spoke to for this project, this sentiment was repeatedly echoed. “My strongest feeling was not joy,” one told me. “I didn’t feel the same happiness that others did when the regime fell. From the very first day I felt, *OK, now the real work begins*. [...] There was fear and confusion – yes – because the new phase is always like that. I once worked in auto mechanics, and it’s always easier to take an engine apart than it is to put it back together.”

This project does not attempt to offer closure; it documents a moment in which, for many, closure is not yet possible. By recording how journalists are returning, reporting, remembering, and re-orienting themselves, it aims to offer modest signposts for the fragile collective work of re-inhabiting a place that has been both lost and reclaimed.

Syria's media system: liberalisation, repression, and managed access

Syria experienced a brief period of press freedom between 1954 and 1958 following independence from France, described as its “golden age of journalism”. During this time, liberal press laws enabled a proliferation of newspapers and periodicals with relatively limited censorship.⁵

Under the rule of Hafez al-Assad – who infamously crushed an Islamist-led uprising, culminating in the [1982 Hama massacre](#) – freedom of expression and political participation, where they existed at all, were severely constrained.⁶

When his son Bashar al-Assad inherited power in 2000, there were tentative signs that the iron grip might loosen. A new [publications law](#) in 2001 allowed private ownership of print media after decades of state dominance under Hafez. However, many of the licenses for emerging private media were granted to businessmen closely connected to the Assad family.⁷

By 2011, demonstrations were steadily spreading across Syria, inspired in part by the Arab Spring. Many Syrians viewed the protests as an opportunity to push for greater freedoms, and [citizen journalism](#) thrived.⁸

⁵ Badran, Y. (2021). Syria: A fragmented media system, in Richter, C. and Kozman, C. (eds.) [Arab Media Systems](#). Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, pp19–36.

⁶ Rodrigues, J. (2011) [1982: Syria's President Hafez al-Assad crushes rebellion in Hama](#), The Guardian, 1 August.

⁷ Badran, Y. (2021). *Ibid.*

⁸ Wall, M & Zahed, S. (2014). [Syrian Citizen Journalism](#). Digital Journalism. 3. pp1-17.

But the government’s response quickly escalated, from arrest campaigns and live fire against protesters to the indiscriminate use of barrel bombs, plunging the country into a prolonged and brutal proxy war.

Some Western media outlets were permitted to enter Syria periodically over the past 14 years; however, their reporting was tightly monitored. Government “minders” accompanied visiting journalists, and informants were at times planted in their hotels or embedded in reporting trips.⁹

In the later years of the conflict, as Bashar al-Assad re-asserted control, more foreign journalists were granted access, while domestic restrictions intensified. The [2021 Cybercrime Law](#), for example, provided a legal framework for online censorship, surveillance, and user monitoring.

What the transitional government says

At the time of writing (August 2025), Ahmad al-Sharaa, previously known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, leads Syria’s transitional government following the overthrow of the Assad dynasty. During his earlier period of control in Idlib, media freedom was widely reported to be highly restricted: journalists and activists faced arbitrary [arrests](#), [physical attacks](#), threats, and [censorship](#).^{10, 11, 12}

Since assuming national leadership, the transitional authorities have appeared to signal greater openness to independent reporting. However, reporting by journalists

⁹ Badran, Y. (2021). *Ibid*.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch. (2024, Dec 4). [Syria: Civilians at Risk Amid Renewed Hostilities](#). HRW.

¹¹ Reporters Sans Frontières. (2019, Nov 15). [Jihadis threaten to kill journalists in Idlib province](#). Rsf.org.

¹² Orient-News (2019) [Security official in Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham threatens residents of Idlib: “Anyone who protests against the authority is lawful to kill!”](#), 11 November.

and press-freedom organisations – some of which are reflected later in this project – suggests that access remains uneven, with continued incidents of restricted movement, the summoning of journalists by authorities, and the denial or withdrawal of press accreditation.

Against this backdrop, Hamza al-Mustafa, the Syrian transitional government’s current Minister of Information, outlined to me his vision for the future of media in Syria.

In a phone call, Minister al-Mustafa described his long-term strategic goal as the abolition of the Ministry of Information itself, which he characterised as a remnant of authoritarian rule. In its place, he envisaged a shift away from state media control towards a communication-focused model, including the development of a “media-friendly” national media system. This would, he said, resemble a public media model in which outlets funded by taxpayers serve the entire community – including government opponents – rather than acting solely as government mouthpieces.



Syrian Information Minister Hamza al-Mustafa (second from left) at the Arab Information Ministers Council on November 26, 2025 – Syria's first high-level participation since reclaiming its seat in the Arab League. Credit: Mohammad Daher/NurPhoto

In the short term, however, he argued that the ministry remains necessary to manage the transition from Syria's highly centralised media system. Over time, he outlined a three-part media landscape: a reformed state news agency to replace the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA); space for independent press offices within government institutions (which he referred to as "media bureaus"); and publicly funded but editorially independent media, drawing on European public-service models.

Minister al-Mustafa acknowledged that the emergence of what he described as a Syrian "media city" would require tolerance of opposing voices and freedom of expression. Syria, he said, must become accustomed to the presence of diverse media through which a plural political life can emerge, describing freedom of expression as among the only "complete values" currently existing in Syria.

Asked whether freedom of the press would ultimately be protected constitutionally, he said this was an eventual goal. In the immediate term, however, he emphasised the development of a society-driven code of ethics for journalists, shaped through dialogue with local journalists, media actors, experts, and unions. This bottom-up approach, he argued, would provide a more practical safeguard than laws drafted by the state, which could later be reinterpreted by state institutions.

To support this process, Minister al-Mustafa said he is leading a six-month initiative to develop a UK-style code of ethics through workshops that include independent and opposition journalists. In his view, such a framework could ultimately make the Ministry of Information itself redundant.

"We do not criticise any Syrian journalist who came back and worked," he said, "and all Syrian institutions, even if they didn't have a license, we gave them permission to operate. This matter – I take it on personally. I am personally responsible for the

protection of journalists. And it cannot happen, while I am present, that a journalist is arrested.”

As a returning journalist and academic himself, Minister al-Mustafa actively encourages exiled journalists to return, citing the need for their expertise in rebuilding Syria’s media capacity. At the same time, he acknowledged — and the accounts that follow in this project attest — that ongoing uncertainties around security, living conditions, and the absence of durable legal guarantees for critical reporting continue to weigh heavily on decisions about return.

What returning journalists say

To better understand the prospects facing exiled journalists who return, I interviewed ten Syrian journalists.¹³ Their accounts reveal a nuanced picture of return. Rather than a single act, “return” takes multiple forms and involves navigating social and psychological realities, material and logistical constraints, shifting professional conditions, and an ongoing calculation of security and risk.

List of interviewees

Name, age	Exile bio	Mode of return (at time of interview)	Return bio
Asser K.*, 31	An experienced journalist from Aleppo. Exiled in April 2017, and became a French citizen in 2023.	Full return	Recently returned to Damascus and maintains his French passport.
Idris M.*, 30s	Journalism student at Damascus University, arrested for filming protests and left Syria in 2017 for Turkey.	Full return	Returned immediately after the regime fell and is currently based in Damascus. Works as a producer at a public TV station.
Hamza K.*, 34	Journalist originally from Idlib who began studying journalism in 2011. Exile took him to Turkey and Egypt. He worked in both Syrian and Turkish media outlets.	Planned return	Returned to Damascus not long after our interview. Currently works at a Syrian media outlet.
Hamza Al Mustafa, 41	Former journalist and academic researcher who served as General Manager of the Syria TV network in Istanbul.	Full return	Returned to Syria after the fall of the regime and is currently Minister of Information in the transitional government.

Continues on page 14.

¹³ * Some names have been altered or shortened to protect identities.

List of interviewees (cont.)

Name, age	Exile bio	Mode of return (at time of interview)	Return bio
Iyad K.*, 37	Journalist from Aleppo. Working since 2011 and co-founder of an opposition media office. Left for Turkey in 2014 and holds Turkish citizenship. Worked for a major international outlet for 11 years and has won awards for breaking news coverage.	Partial return	Currently travels between Turkey and Syria for work and plans to move back to Syria permanently by July 2025.
Kholoud Helmi, 42	SOAS graduate and co-founder of Enab Baladi who lost her brother and many colleagues during the early days of the war. Left Daryya for Lebanon in 2013, moved to Turkey in 2014.	Planned return	Currently lives in the UK. Plans to return to Syria soon, likely within a year.
M. W.*, 40s	Syrian journalist with extensive experience. Further detail withheld to protect identity.	No return	Currently in exile but visited Damascus in January 2025. Remains in Istanbul, citing concerns over the political sphere in Syria.
Nadia K.*, 30s	Journalism graduate from Damascus. Worked at Dunya TV until 2010, and then Al Jazeera, and Orient News (Turkey). Has 16 years' experience in TV, radio, and digital media and is currently a news anchor for Syrian state television in Damascus.	Full return	Returned immediately after the regime fell and is currently based in Damascus, helping to found the new state media.
Zouhir S.*, 34	Journalist from Aleppo. Forcibly displaced in 2016.	No return	Currently based in the UK on a visa where he works as a researcher. Plans to visit Syria though does not currently intend to return to reporting on Syria.
Rayan M.*, 36	Journalist from the Druze minority who served as editor-in-chief of a regional news outlet for years. Exiled to Lebanon in 2022 and France in 2023.	Full return	Returned immediately to Suwayda after the regime fell. Within six months faced multiple death threats and witnessed the execution of a colleague. Remains in Suwayda but strongly advises other journalists not to return.

*Pseudonyms used and details withheld to protect interviewees.

1. Different modes and reasons for return

There was no single notion of “return” as physical homecoming among my interviewees. Journalists described return as a series of arrangements shaped by legal status, family obligations, professional commitments, resources and risk assessment.

Of the nine journalists and one former journalist I spoke to, five had made a full return to Syria. One had returned partially, travelling between Syria and their countries of exile. Two were in the process of planning a return, while two had decided not to return but continues to analyse developments in Syria from abroad.

Kholoud Helmi’s return, for example, has been organisational rather than personal. While unable to return permanently to Syria herself, the independent newspaper she co-founded, *Enab Baladi*, has re-entered Syria’s public space.

Founded in 2011 in Darayya, *Enab Baladi* operated from exile in Istanbul for years following the murder of two co-founders in government detention – including Kholoud’s brother.

Following the fall of the Assad regime, the newspaper began circulating openly inside the country, with copies seen in cafés in Damascus, carried openly by readers, and even distributed within the Ministry of Information.

For Kholoud, this visibility represents a form of partial justice — not closure, but recognition of the sacrifices made by those who believed in independent media and paid with their lives.

In January 2025, *Enab Baladi* rented an office in Damascus, began hiring staff, and issued formal contracts, establishing a physical presence in Syria’s emerging media landscape. While Kholoud herself remains constrained by the destruction of her home,

the task of winding down the Istanbul office, and the financial realities of rebuilding, the organisation she helped create has secured a foothold inside the country.

Journalism itself can move ahead of the bodies that create it.

For Idris M., going home was not simply about employment or political change; it is an attempt to reclaim a life trajectory that was violently interrupted. He was studying at Damascus University in 2010 but was expelled in 2012 following a 300-day detention for filming protests and participating in peaceful protests. He left Syria around 2017 and, when he returned in 2025, re-enrolled in university.

He describes his return as both a source of excitement and a heavy responsibility to salvage parts of a past that was stolen. His return is driven less by optimism and more by obligation — a sense that, having survived and been given another chance, he must participate in shaping what comes next.

2. Social and psychological realities

Even those who have returned partially reported experiencing a sense of relief upon arrival. Relief in having access on the ground, in no longer being treated as a second-class citizen in a foreign land, in no longer carrying the weight of whether your reporting has put colleagues or sources at risk. This relief, however, has not been unfettered.

Return also brings with it a set of social and psychological realities that journalists must navigate. For example, partial-returner Iyad described persistently being recognised as an outsider despite his efforts to blend in. He speaks the same dialect, dresses similarly, and shares local mannerisms, yet taxi drivers and neighbours quickly identify him as someone who has lived abroad. He said his social life today increasingly

revolves around other returnees, many of whom had previously lived in Turkey or Europe.

“I’m still hesitant about staying permanently,” he said. “Integration is the hardest part – even among people who lived side by side years ago. I don’t blame those who stayed; people suffered. But I mostly spend time within my own circle. It’s not ideal, but it feels unavoidable.”

Iyad K. and all my other interviewees were keen to acknowledge they did not experience the full extent of the suffering endured by those who remained inside Syria. But many noted that exile came with its own costs and sacrifices. Enduring ideas about unequal experiences of risk and suffering may be why some Syrians struggle to accept exiled journalists as legitimate voices on Syrian affairs.

Idris M. and others I spoke to said one privilege of leaving Syria was that it had opened their eyes to unconscious bias. Those who stayed, they noted, seemed intent on weighting the suffering of different groups under Assad – often through the lens of disinformation and division spread by the regime. Exiled journalists said they had witnessed this bias on all sides, fuelling a persistent mindset of exclusion rather than a shared recognition of all victims.

3. Material and logistical constraints

The cost of relocating and re-establishing oneself in Syria is also a major barrier. When I spoke to Hamza K., a Syrian journalist who lived in Istanbul and worked with Turkish and exiled Syrian media outlets, he told me he was considering relocating. For Hamza, the major hurdle was not political or social uncertainty but the financial hurdle. While his salary from working in television was better than most, the cost-of-living crisis in Turkey meant there was little in the way of savings to buffer a return.

And return to a country with broken infrastructure is not cheap: fruits and basic food items might be cheaper in Syria than Turkey, but a car would be required to get around, a new home requires furnishing, new deposits, joining fees, and so on. It all adds up.

For journalists trying to maintain a “one foot in, one foot out” approach, regular travel between Syria and their home in exile is also very expensive. Paying rent in two places is difficult too.

Full-returner Iyad K. has work that affords him a comfortable, upper-middle class life in Aleppo. But, as mentioned above, he described occasional discrimination when seeking housing, and a broader sense of unease in everyday interactions.

4. Professional positioning and conditions

Beyond social reintegration, return also places journalists inside unresolved professional debates shaped by exile, survival, institutional collapse, and transition.

Government oversight

While some outlets operate with “big margins of freedom” and receive permits, there are still limitations, and violations against journalists continue to occur. See the section below, [Security and risk calculus](#).

“We are operating within really broad margins of freedom,” Kholoud told me. “But at the same time, we have limitations. We criticise them and we haven’t heard anything from them yet. Is it because they’re pro freedom of expression or because they are too busy to have a look at us now?”

Idris said the current tone could become “harsher” as the government gains more control over the situation on the ground – militarily, economically, and

politically. He noted red flags, like the hiring of people in key government positions who showed more “loyalty” than “competence”.

It is an opinion shared by many Syrians, who are applying cautious optimism. For Kholoud, “cautious optimism” has meant criticising the government after the coastal areas massacres and the massacres in Suwayda. Without sustained critical engagement, she warned, the risk is not simply stagnation but regression – a return to familiar patterns of control.

Strained finances

Independent Syrian media organisations, like many others globally, face significant funding challenges. Donor-funded media, like Kholoud’s *Enab Baladi*, have lost a third of funding after the USAID cuts of 2025. Qatari- and UAE-funded media are doing better than many other outlets in terms of resources and survival, however these funds often come with political strings attached that may influence editorial policies.

Strange bedfellows

Sources at the Ministry of Information estimate they have inherited 7,000 staff of varying skill levels and outdated equipment in the public media space. The challenge here is to maintain the basic functionality of the state media while integrating old and new culture, processes, and systems.

Idris, who works at a state outlet, said old employees – some of whom he knows to be complicit in Assad’s crimes – are still working alongside the new staff. Management has had to run its own reconciliation programmes to facilitate collaboration between the two groups. Replacing everyone just isn’t practical:

for one, the broadcast system is so outdated and inefficient that only legacy staff know how to operate it.

Cautious criticism

Nadia K., a journalism graduate from Damascus University with extensive experience in television and radio journalism, described the toll of watching Syria deteriorate from afar. “It makes you sick,” she said. “This was always like a lump in our throats,” she said. “Syria was ours even though we were outside. When the regime fell, I came back immediately. I felt that now is our time.”

Now working at state-owned TV station *Al-Ikhbariyya* (a 24-hour news channel), Nadia acknowledges the difficulty of working in state media while attempting to reshape its editorial culture.

“We’re used to being opposition and working in opposition channels,” said Nadia. “Working as the state’s voice? That’s definitely new for me. Criticism was easier. And journalism’s role, as the fourth estate, is to criticise. But you also have to create balance. Because too much criticism sometimes really harms things. [...] We need to slow down, give everyone a chance to work, and then criticise. Because now you’re inheriting a very harsh, very damaged legacy from the regime, across all sectors. You have to give space. That’s what I’m doing, actually, in my role.”

The early months were marked by institutional resistance and technical obstacles, including the challenges of securing a broadcast frequency under sanctions. “This patience is part of the victory,” she said. “It’s not like we won and can simply celebrate.”

Polarization and misinformation challenges

Exiled Syrian journalist Zouhir S. said one of the biggest challenges facing journalists is the polarizing diasporic online landscape of post-Assad Syria.

When armed supporters of the old Assad regime carried out coordinated attacks on security checkpoints of the transitional government forces in March 2025, reprisals led to the killing of hundreds of civilians, especially Alawites. And, in July 2025, the government failed to quell violence between Syria's Druze community in Suwayda and Bedouin fighters. More than 600 people were killed.

On both occasions, Syrians turned largely to Facebook for information, and found conflicting realities reported along sectarian lines.¹⁴ Ahmed Primo, chief executive at independent fact-checking platform Verify Syria, told [Al Jazeera](#): “[Verify Syria was] founded in 2016, and, it has kept up with many major events on the Syrian, Arab and international levels, but our team has not witnessed a flood of misleading news like the one we are facing now.”¹⁵

These parallel narratives have acted as a counter incentive to several journalists I spoke to who would otherwise contemplate permanent return to Syria.

Activism vs professionalism

Asser K. is a Syrian-French writer and journalist who left the country and returned in 2025. He told me he had witnessed journalists openly side with “the

¹⁴ Waters, G. and Koontz, K., 2025. [Sectarianism, social media, and Syria's information blackhole](#). Atlantic Council MENASource, 28 May.

¹⁵ Khedr, F., 2025. [Misinformation in Syria: Natural chaos or organised campaign?](#) Al Jazeera Journalism Review, 11 March.

people”, their country, or just a cause, rather than striving for neutrality. Young journalists and those who did not leave Assad-controlled areas were more prone to blurring the line between journalism and activism, he said.

Idris said he too witnessed clashes over such norms between journalists returning from exile and those who stayed in Syria. He witnessed constructive conversations, too. But he felt he saw more openness from those who lived outside Assad-controlled areas (both inside and outside Syria). Iyad and Nadia had similar observations. As Nadia put it: sometimes revolutionary context overshadows professional standards.

Experience outside of Assad’s repressive environment may have allowed some Syrian journalists the freedom to adopt a more nuanced attitude to unbiased reporting. Syrians inside Syria had to use journalism as a survival mechanism; journalists outside Syria have the privilege to use it for something beyond that: to practice it as a profession and get paid for it. Witnessing the role of journalism outside Syria’s borders may have helped embed an appreciation for its relevance beyond just activism.

Despite a disenchantment with legacy and western media outlets among some journalists (and more interest in decentralized approaches and local storytelling), Asser also noted that the younger generation is eager to learn and is enthusiastic.

Nadia sees it as the responsibility of professional journalists to help educate citizen journalists and practicing journalists who didn’t get experiences in professional newsrooms or outside of their local media centres.

Generational fatigue and transfer

Some journalists who were operational from the start of the revolution are “somewhat bitter”, according to Asser, and tend to exclude those who are younger than them, who “maybe didn’t suffer and sacrifice as much”. “Even I am obviously very disenchanted,” he said. “We all have had similar trajectories and disappointments and [...] many have already moved on. I don’t think we’re being the best prophets and apostles for journalism.”

This is not to suggest that all older journalists are the same: my interviewees also spoke about experienced journalists running workshops to train a younger wave of “fixers” (local producers) about their rights, how to get paid, and how to stay safe.

“There are many young people [...] who are genuinely trying to do something meaningful, but they’re not always welcomed by the older revolutionaries. These elders did something heroic in their time, but they also lost out on education, opportunities, and life abroad. Meanwhile, young exiles had the chance to study at places like Columbia or Harvard. Now, they’re ready and qualified, but there’s tension with the old guard.” That tension, he argues, can make integration harder, because of disagreements over what criteria they must satisfy to be seen as credible and to belong.

Expanding definitions of journalism

One of my interviewees set up a satirical news outlet on social media, and found that this has been a more reliable path to speaking truth to power. They co-manage “Street”, which skewers all sides of the conflict and every layer of Syrian society through sharp, fast-paced videos.

They say they are not trying to share their own political views, but dismantle everyone else's by unveiling the absurdity they see in Syria's political scene. "I can't take anything seriously. I can only see the satire [in what's happening]."

Despite deep polarization on the ground, the Street comment section reveals moments of shared understanding: people from different backgrounds laughing together at the painful realities of Syria.

Zouhir gave up reporting in 2020, and decided to focus instead on open-source intelligence research (OSINT). He told me he had grown "tired of this business" [of journalism]. While he is considering returning to Syria for a visit, he has no intention of working as a reporter there: he views the current media landscape as a tussle between older revolutionaries who believe they hold exclusive authority, and literal "shabiha" (thugs) from the former regime attempting to establish their own platforms. The only opportunity that might tempt Zouhir back to journalism about Syria is the opportunity to initiate an Arabic-language local news project.

5. Security and risk calculus

Not all returns lead to reintegration, repair, or renewed purpose. For some journalists, return has instead exposed the limits of hope and the continued presence of lethal risk. Rayan, a Syrian journalist from the Druze minority, offers a stark counterpoint to narratives of opportunity and reconstruction.

Rayan fled Syria in 2022 and sought asylum in France. When the Assad regime fell, he returned immediately to his hometown of Suwayda, driven by a belief that the conditions which had made journalism impossible had finally been removed. For the first time, he said, he could openly identify himself as a journalist without fear. Leaving

behind the relative safety of France, where his asylum case was still pending, Rayan chose to practise journalism on the ground, living among his community and sharing in their daily realities.

Within weeks, conditions deteriorated. Armed clashes erupted between Druze groups and government forces, and Suwayda — which had appeared stable — became a site of acute violence. “We’re under the knife,” he said. This time, he had no viable exit.

The risks of return became brutally clear with the killing of his colleague, Sarri Al-Shoufi, a photojournalist working with him at Suwayda 24, a local community news outlet where Rayan served as editor-in-chief. On the morning of 14 July, Sarri called Rayan after being injured in an attack on his village. While on the phone, Rayan heard him identify himself to nearby forces as an unarmed civilian and a photographer. Moments later, Rayan heard gunfire, screams, and a sectarian slur. Sarri was executed on the spot, his camera beside him — the same camera with which he had documented anti-Assad protests for years.

Days later, a video was sent to Suwayda 24’s public email address. In the recording, a man identified by Rayan as a government fighter brandished a knife and issued explicit sectarian threats against Druze journalists. Rayan believes the outlet was targeted precisely because of its commitment to documenting abuses by all parties.

For Rayan, these events shattered any remaining belief that return could be sustained under the new authorities. Home, he concluded, is not defined by geography or memory, but by dignity, equality, and the rule of law. In Syria, he no longer found those conditions. The violence he witnessed, including sexual violence and killings carried

out on sectarian grounds, led him to describe return not as liberation, but as betrayal — by a political order that failed to protect its citizens and by revolutionary partners who remained silent in the face of atrocities.

Rayan now advises Syrian journalists not to return.

Like Rayan, Idris expressed a loss of trust in follow-up interviews. He had hoped for a culture of critique: one that allows for accountability and debate while also recognising positive contributions. Instead, he said he found himself avoiding sharing his opinions even in private settings due to potential backlash.

Zouhir said that, while there were no reports of Assad-style imprisonment and torture in the new Syria, he had heard of journalists facing harassment and even kidnapping by groups connected to the government. Other journalists I spoke to mentioned trouble having their accreditation approved and not being allowed access to certain conflict areas to report. Return remains a calculated risk.

Lessons from other nations in transition

Never dismantle your exile infrastructure

Toe Zaw Latt, a Burmese journalist exiled for 37 years, offers a cautionary lesson about return during political transitions. After fleeing Myanmar following the 1988 uprising, Latt turned to journalism and spent decades in exile, eventually becoming Thai bureau chief for the Democratic Voice of Burma, an exile-based media organisation headquartered in Norway. From abroad, DVB operated a “one foot in, one foot out” model: information was gathered through clandestine networks inside Myanmar, then edited and broadcast from exile via satellite and shortwave radio – a strategy familiar to Syrian independent outlets working under Assad.

When Myanmar transitioned to civilian rule in 2011, Latt returned to expand media space inside the country. DVB obtained a broadcast licence, and between 2015 and

2020 he describes the period as a rare moment of genuine openness. But the transition proved fragile. In 2021, a military coup reversed these gains. DVB's licence was revoked, journalists were arrested, and Latt was forced back into exile.

This second exile reinforced what he now considers a core principle for journalists returning during transitions: never dismantle exile infrastructure. The networks, skills, and institutional memory built abroad are not temporary scaffolding; they are insurance. Latt advises Syrian newsrooms not to abandon their exiled bases, even when return feels possible or desirable. Transitions, he warns, are "shaky ground" – a "marriage without love" that can collapse at any moment.

Despite this caution, Latt strongly advocates for journalists to return when space opens, even briefly. Presence matters. Journalists help shape accountability, document abuses, and prevent new authorities — revolutionary or otherwise — from operating unchecked.

"Never negotiate editorial independence," he insists. Compromise, in his view, is not pragmatism but betrayal: of the profession and the public.

What research tells us about exile

In 1984, Edward Said, one of the most influential theorists of exile and displacement, wrote: “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home... its essential sadness can never be surmounted.”¹⁶

What my interviewees have already so generously described about their exile experiences in the previous chapter is not surprising to experts: these experiences have been well documented and analysed by academics.

To start with, the literature draws a clear distinction between the effects of consensual and forced exile. In most Syrian journalists’ cases, forced exile has profoundly shaped the identity of those abroad. Few had a choice in where to seek refuge: some fled to neighbouring countries, while others undertook perilous journeys across water and borders between Turkey and Greece.

Renos K. Papadopoulos, director of the Centre for Trauma, Asylum, and Refugees at the University of Essex and author of *Therapeutic Care for Refugees*, explains that people in exile had to learn to live in different temporalities (experiences of time): holding onto memories of the home they lost in the past, imagining possibilities for the home they might reclaim in the future, and negotiating their sense of belonging in the present.¹⁷

¹⁶ Said, E.W., 2000. Reflections on exile and other essays. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Essay originally published 1984.)

¹⁷ Papadopoulos, R.K. (Ed.). (2002). [Therapeutic Care for Refugees: No Place Like Home](#) (1st ed.). Routledge.

All of this adds to a pervading sense of exhaustion in exile. So too does the need to translate yourself into a different language or culture. And, with no clear timeline or certainty about when the war would end or when they might return home, Syrians undertook the sometimes-painful process of forging new identities – all the while unsure how much to invest in building a new life in exile.

Some social scientists, like Robin Cohen, Professor Emeritus of Development Studies at the University of Oxford, suggest the toll of exile can be lessened when a diaspora and supporting institutions emerge. By 2023, more than six million Syrians were living in exile, with a comparable number displaced inside the country.¹⁸ But as Cohen himself wrote: “the consolidation of a diaspora often stretches across decades” and 13 years of exile did not yield adequate support systems for a group who continued to hope their displacement would be temporary.¹⁹

In such circumstances, Papadopoulos wrote, immediate needs dominate, delaying or interrupting deeper psychological processing of trauma.²⁰ This is where it becomes useful to know about Judith Herman’s trauma recovery framework: moving through the stages of safety, mourning, and reconnection is not always feasible in the conditions of forced exile.²¹ That means many Syrian journalists returning from exile do so without ever processing the reality of the choice. Journalists who left Syria – often abruptly – have rebuilt lives elsewhere, acquiring new skills, professional norms, and expectations

¹⁸ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2025. [Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2024](#).

¹⁹ Cohen, R., 2008. *Global diasporas: an introduction*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge. (Original work published 1997.)

²⁰ Papadopoulos, R. K. (2005). *Therapeutic Care for Refugees : No Place Like Home* (pp. 9–40). Karnac. (Original work published 2002)

²¹ Herman, J. (1992). [Trauma and Recovery](#). New York: Basic Books.

around freedom of expression. At the same time, prolonged absence has created distance from the country they remember and from trauma they have not had the conditions to name. These tensions form a central part of the cost of exile, and continue to shape decisions about whether, when, and how return is possible.

If exile is so hard, why isn't going home easy?

Kholoud Helmi, co-founder of *Enab Baladi*, described how even short visits to Syria can surface multiple layers of moral injury at once, complicating both the desire to return and the capacity to do so sustainably. Return, she noted, often compresses years of accumulated loss, deprivation, and ethical strain into a single moment — not only one's own, but that of the people around them.

This burden is intensified by the invisibility of exile to those living outside it.

“You try to explain that to other people, but they don't understand,” Kholoud said.

“They're like, *why are you anxious? Why are you having panic attacks? Why are you this? Why are you that?* [...] Nobody understands the rootlessness — nobody understands why this is exhausting. For them it seems like, *what an exciting life.*”

I raised these observations with Dr Anthony Feinstein, a neuropsychiatrist and professor at the University of Toronto whose research focuses on trauma and moral injury among journalists exposed to conflict. Reflecting on Syria's transition, Dr Feinstein cautioned against assumptions of rapid recovery: “When the trauma runs as deep as it does in your country, it's not suddenly, ‘*Oh well, we've got a new government, things are fine, let's rebuild.*’ People are going to carry very deep and very painful scars for generations – families who've lost children, parents, loved ones. You can't just say, ‘*It's happened, let's move on.*’ The pain is too deep. [...] It's not like you're returning to a civil society that's intact; you're returning to one that's reinventing itself. That period of flux and uncertainty is, in itself, a major stress.”

Feinstein’s work has identified several factors that place journalists at high risk of moral injury, which can be a precursor to post traumatic stress disorder if it is not identified and dealt with. Applied to Syrians in exile, moral injury indicators may include: a lack of organisational support; working in isolation; insufficient resources and funding, which heighten stress, precarity, and loneliness; repeatedly stepping beyond the journalistic role (covering ongoing suffering often compels journalists to intervene or provide assistance); a deep personal connection to the stories they report, combined with their own unprocessed experiences of trauma; high workloads and the cumulative emotional toll of reporting on extreme violence, including mass graves, chemical attacks, massacres, and torture.

As Dr Feinstein and other researchers note, return can function as a kind of cultural shock or secondary displacement, leaving returnees alienated and, at times, even prompting re-emigration or circular migration.²² A better understanding of “home” can help to mitigate this, and we will explore it in the next chapter.

Lessons from other nations in transition

Exile changes you — and return does not undo it

The experience of exile and return is not unique to Syria. Fernando Gabeira, a Brazilian journalist, writer, and former political militant, offers a striking parallel. Under Brazil’s military dictatorship, which lasted from 1964 to 1985, Gabeira was forced into exile in Europe after participating in the armed resistance, including the 1969 kidnapping of the US ambassador to Brazil. Like many Syrian journalists today, the idea of return dominated his years abroad. He saw exile not only as a rupture, but as a period of

²² Markowitz, F. and Stefansson, A. H. (2004) Homecomings: Unsettling Paths of Return. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

preparation — a time to learn, reflect, and gather ideas he believed would be necessary once Brazil was free.

Yet return was not a simple homecoming. After years immersed in European political and cultural life, Gabeira discovered that coming back exposed how deeply exile had changed him. “You are not completely at home,” he reflected. The habits, expectations, and freedoms absorbed abroad did not always align with the realities of post-dictatorship Brazil. Exile had reshaped his identity, and return revealed a sense of permanent in-between-ness: never fully adapted to exile, yet no longer fully at home after return.

Gabeira often described this state as a kind of limbo. During exile, return feels like the answer to everything; once it happens, it becomes clear that neither the person nor the country is the same. This dissonance did not paralyse him. Instead, it clarified his purpose. Upon returning, Gabeira consciously used his public profile to introduce ideas shaped by his time abroad, including advocacy for women’s rights, minority rights, and challenges to rigid models of masculinity — causes that had gained urgency during his years in Sweden and Germany.

For Gabeira, these interventions were not separate from journalism; they were part of its responsibility. He argued that journalists returning from exile bring with them widened perspectives that can help societies confront entrenched norms. Many Syrians expressed a similar feeling: too Syrian abroad, too foreign at home, yet still compelled to contribute. Gabeira’s experience suggests that return is not about reclaiming a former self, but about deciding how to act with the person exile has made you.

What research tells us about returning ‘home’

As we saw in the previous chapter, return is often spoken about as a moment that resolves exile and restores belonging. Research suggests otherwise.

Scholars of exile and migration have long argued that home is not simply a place one goes back to, but something that is renegotiated through memory, loss, identity, and social recognition.²³

This understanding is not new. We can look as far back as nearly 2,700 years ago, to Homer’s *Odyssey*, for a lens on the idea of leaving and returning home. When Odysseus physically arrives on the shores of Ithaca, he does not immediately recognise the place as home, nor is he recognised by those around him. Home is a construct formed through social connections, personal identity, and the psychological experience.²⁴ Simply arriving in a geographic place does not restore identity or belonging; home requires recognition, both from oneself and from others, and a process of reintegration.

Oudai Tozan, a Syrian scholar of forced migration, describes it as a [tangle of contradictions](#): home is supposed to fulfil the need for rootedness, yet for Syrians, home is also the site of violence and trauma, creating a persistent tension between attachment and rupture.²⁵

²³ Papadopoulos, R.K. (2002/2005) *Therapeutic care for refugees: No place like home*. London: Karnac Books, pp.9-40.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Tozan, O. (2025). [“Living in a world of ambivalence”: The complexity of home in exile](#). Journal of Refugee Studies.

This resonates with my own experience and those of exiled Syrian journalists I interviewed for this project. Returning to Syria has not restored the life or identity that was left behind. The cities, neighbourhoods, and social dynamics they once knew are transformed, just as Ithaca was to Odysseus. That dissonance between expectation and reality can feed disillusionment.

Essentialist and anti-essentialist theories of return

In migration and exile studies, the tension described above is often framed through two broad perspectives: essentialist and anti-essentialist.²⁶ An essentialist view treats home as a fixed and natural site of identity, inseparable from place.

For essentialists, return is the natural resolution of displacement, and homecoming is expected to restore belonging, wholeness, and security.²⁷ Exile, by contrast, is understood as an incomplete or temporary state.

Anti-essentialists challenge this assumption.²⁸ From their perspective, home is relational and dynamic rather than fixed. It can be shaped by territory, but it can also be shaped by memory, imagination, and social ties. People may experience home across multiple locations simultaneously, or in ways that are not anchored to a single place of origin.

²⁶ Tozan, O. (2025) '[Living in a world of ambivalence: The complexity of home in exile](#)', Journal of Refugee Studies, 38(4), pp.967-981.

²⁷ Markowitz, F. and Stefansson, A.H. (eds.) (2004) Homecomings: Unsettling Paths of Return. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books

²⁸ Tozan, O. (2025) '[Living in a world of ambivalence: The complexity of home in exile](#)', Journal of Refugee Studies, 38(4), pp.967-981.

For exiled Syrians, this often reflects lived reality. Home may exist partially in exile – in Germany, Turkey, the UK, or Lebanon – while connections to Syria persist through memory, nostalgia, and imagined futures.

Even if returning to Syria seems like the “natural” step, political transformations, the destruction of war, and social shifts mean that the homeland they left [no longer exists](#), in the same way that the person they were when they left has been changed by new cultures, work experiences, social connections, and time.^{29, 30}

As social anthropologists Markowitz & Stefansson argue in *Homecomings: Unsettling Paths of Return*, there is no single process of return, but rather a multiplicity of homecomings, each with its own meaning.³¹

Some may engage in “[go-and-see](#)” visits, which can generate new forms of belonging and transnational engagement (what Brettell describes as a social process in which migrants operate across geographic, political, and cultural borders).^{32, 33} Iyad, for example, described a desire to divide his life between Syria and Turkey rather than commit immediately to permanent return. Such mobility reflects what Zetter describes

²⁹ Al-Ali, N. and Koser, K. (2002) ‘Transnationalism, international migration and home’, in Al-Ali, N. and Koser, K. (eds.) *New approaches to migration? Transnational communities and the transformation of home*. London: Routledge, pp.1–14.

³⁰ Zetter, R. (2021) ‘[Refugees and their return home: unsettling matters](#)’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(1), pp.7–22.

³¹ Markowitz, F. and Stefansson, A.H. (eds.) (2004) *Homecomings: Unsettling Paths of Return*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books

³² Brettell, C. B. (2015) ‘[Migration: anthropological perspectives](#)’, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (2nd edn), pp. 422–426.

³³ In practice, transnational engagement can facilitate local integration in host countries while also strengthening – rather than diminishing – attachment to the country of origin. For more, see: De Bree, J., Davids, T. and de Haas, H. (2010) ‘[Post-return experiences and transnational belonging of return migrants: a Dutch–Moroccan case study](#)’, *Global Networks*, 10(4), pp.489–509.

as the non-linear nature of refugee return: shaped by individual circumstances, shifting security conditions, and economic realities.³⁴ Return often occurs incrementally, intermittently, or not at all.

The first visit back plays a particularly significant role. [Muggeridge and Doná](#) describe this moment as a catalyst: a confrontation between imagination and reality that can bring an end to prolonged waiting and ambiguity in exile.³⁵ Such visits heighten awareness of time passed, personal change, and altered social landscapes, allowing returnees to reassess the meaning of home, the myth of return, and their own place within the refugee cycle.

Papadopoulos argues that what unites refugees is not trauma, but the loss of home – a loss that produces ongoing grief.³⁶ Refugees are expected to simultaneously demonstrate their personal grief and their professional resilience to access protection in host countries, according to Yanery Navarro Vigil and Catherine Baillie Abidi.³⁷ The tension between having to be both puts additional strain on journalists' identity.

Taken together, the literature suggests understanding return not as a resolution, but as a process: one that often dismantles the myth of home rather than restoring it.

³⁴ Zetter, R. (2021) '[Refugees and their return home: unsettling matters](#)', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(1), pp. 7–22.

³⁵ Muggeridge, H. and Doná, G. (2006) '[Back home? Refugees' experiences of their first visit back to their country of origin](#)', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 19(4), pp. 415–432.

³⁶ Papadopoulos, R. K. (2002) 'Refugees, home and trauma', in *Therapeutic Care for Refugees: No Place Like Home*, London: Karnac, pp9–39.

³⁷ Vigil, Y. N. and Baillie Abidi, C. (2018) "'We' the refugees: reflections on refugee labels and identities', *Refuge*, 34(2), pp52–60. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1055576ar>

German philosopher Martin Heidegger offers a view that may hold comfort for returning exiles. He suggested that the idea of “home” only makes sense when set [against its opposite](#) (for example, through exile): the feeling of being unhomely, unsettled, or out of place.³⁸

This concept is key to the conversation around who has legitimacy in the conversation around Syria’s future because it suggests those who do return from exile may carry a uniquely nuanced understanding of home, shaped by absence as well as attachment. Their perspective can critically complement that of those who remained, contributing to how Syria is imagined and debated during periods of transition.

³⁸ Kurir, M. (2023) [‘The paradox of home in Heidegger’s philosophy’](#), AM Journal of Art and Media Studies, 30, pp.207-218.

The implications for journalism

The futures of journalistic freedom and political power in Syria are closely entwined. Some [researchers predict](#) that Syria could become an authoritarian-democratic hybrid regime, as Egypt and Tunisia did following the Arab Spring.³⁹ In this scenario, journalism will be more likely to experience authoritarian control than freedom of expression. That outcome is possible, but not inevitable.

Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere suggests journalism can be an active force in shaping political outcomes.⁴⁰ Social media may function as a semi-autonomous space for expression under authoritarian conditions, but speech that cannot be translated into [collective action or institutional accountability](#) risks losing political force.⁴¹

The practices, ethical norms, and professional safeguards established now will influence whether future public debate in Syria is characterised by deliberation and accountability, or by managed consent and repression. What we do next matters.

Journalism for transition

Research on transitional societies has shown that the structure and freedom of the media often acts as a magnifying glass for broader political change, revealing both the

³⁹ Stepan, A. and Linz, J.J. (2013) '[Democratization theory and the "Arab Spring"](#)', *Journal of Democracy*, 24(2), pp. 15–30.

⁴⁰ Habermas, J. (1989) *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Translated by T. Burger with the assistance of F. Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 83–181.

⁴¹ Salikov, A. (2018). [Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and Rethinking the Public Sphere in the Age of Social Media](#). *Russian Sociological Review*, 17(4), 88–102.

promises and the limits of democratization in practice.⁴² In Syria's case, the outcome of these early struggles will shape not only the future of journalism, but the wider public's ability to understand, contest, and influence the post-Assad order.

In many post-authoritarian contexts, confrontations between governments and journalists emerge quickly and are often framed as disputes over national unity, security, or social stability.⁴³ In practice, these debates test how much dissent a new political order is willing to tolerate.

In the words of Idris, journalism will become even more critical during the country's reconstruction phase, particularly following the recent lifting of European sanctions. As foreign and local companies begin to engage in rebuilding projects, he argues that journalists must act as watchdogs — informing citizens of their rights, explaining how to claim them, and monitoring both corporate and governmental behaviour to prevent exploitation. This is especially urgent, he notes, for communities whose homes and villages were destroyed during the conflict and who now face heightened vulnerability in negotiations over land, compensation, and redevelopment.

Journalism for civil discourse

Sectarianism has not vanished with the collapse of the Assad regime, but it does not have to define Syria's future.

Syrians have lived in isolation from each other for years: the country was effectively divided into at least eight [pockets of control](#), each with their own narratives and

⁴² *Ibid.* Voltmer, K. (2013)

⁴³ Voltmer, K. (2013). *The media in transitional democracies*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp1–17.

information bubbles.⁴⁴ Now, Syrians have a chance to learn about one another and to recognise that people on the “other side” were not dehumanised enemies as they were led to believe, but fellow citizens who endured different hardships under different authorities.

This is the most important reality for journalists to grasp upon return, and it points to their most important role in the transition: fostering shared reality and meaning.

Audiences are dealing with mistrust, blame, survivor’s guilt, and a deep lack of feeling seen and being understood. In this context, journalists must seek perspectives from across the country, ensuring that diverse communities see parts of themselves represented in the media.

The fears and grievances sown by Assad to maintain control will not evaporate without organised intervention. Here, independent journalism plays a vital role in restoring public trust, countering polarization, and correcting false narratives that circulate on social media.

Journalism should also resist the idea that sectarian violence is inevitable or historically fixed. We can draw on expertise and invite historical analysis into our coverage. The 1860 Damascus massacre, in which a Sunni mob attacked the city’s Christian community, is one such example.⁴⁵ Despite the scale of the violence, it did not produce a lasting sectarian rupture. In the years that followed, Syrians rebuilt civic life and reintegrated communities that had been violently targeted.

⁴⁴ AJLabs (2024) [Mapping who controls what in Syria](#). Al Jazeera, 1 December.

⁴⁵ Rogan, E. (2011) *The Damascus events: the 1860 massacre and the destruction of the old Ottoman order*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

As Nadia explained, inviting diverse guests, asking tough questions, and even covering grievances against the government isn't just a professional challenge for her; it's part of stitching the country back together. In her view, trust in media and trust among citizens rise or fall together: accurate, inclusive coverage makes the state more accountable and slowly rebuilds social connection across those once-divided communities.

Journalism for grief

For many Syrian journalists, return is inseparable from grief. Losses of family members, homes, and years of life are not individual experiences alone, but collective ones — shaped by a long history in which public mourning was actively suppressed. While in Syria, I heard accounts of collective funerals held quietly across Damascus, after families were denied the right to grieve relatives who died in detention under Assad.

In this context, journalism carries a particular weight. Beyond reporting current events, journalists play a central role in documenting past atrocities, supporting processes of transitional justice, and helping societies prepare for the difficult work of accountability and reconciliation. Fact-checking, archival reporting, and sustained investigative work are not only professional tasks, but part of how collective memory is established and contested.

The detention and torture system is central to the legacy of Syria under Assad, and documenting it remains a core journalistic concern. Yet the emotional costs are significant. When collective grieving is delayed or unsupported, the risk of long-term psychological harm increases — including burnout and withdrawal from the profession.

These pressures not only affect individual journalists, but also shape the future capacity of Syrian journalism itself.

Journalism for the repair of moral injury

Iyad K., a Syrian journalist from Aleppo, described how his initial joy at the fall of the Assad regime quickly gave way to a sense of reckoning. Within an hour, he said, celebration was overtaken by memories of the uprising and its aftermath.

For Iyad, the impulse to return was as much driven by professional duty as by a desire for moral repair. He spoke openly about how professional mistakes he made during his early years as an activist journalist continue to weigh on him. Even where responsibility is indirect, he described a lingering sense that he “helped break” Syria, and that repair now feels necessary. This bears many of the hallmarks of moral injury, explained by Dr Feinstein in [an earlier chapter](#).

A recent visit to Syria intensified these feelings. Confronted by the visible trauma of people in his hometown, he described return not as a hopeful project but as an ethical burden, for which he felt the need to make amends. He sees journalism as a way to do so. “I feel the responsibility,” he said. “I just want people to be safe, not taken to prisons. I want some kind of rule of law. Even if I left journalism, I’d still be doing it on the side — because this feels like the only way I can help now.”

It is not inaccurate to say that return may offer pathways to moral injury repair. But where return is bound up with it, journalists must be mindful of the emotional toll.

Lessons from other nations in transition

Freedom must be written, defended, and taught

Legal frameworks matter – but only if journalists and the public understand and defend them. Benjamin Fernández Bogado, a Paraguayan journalist, academic, and legal scholar, draws on his experience of transitioning from dictatorship to democracy in Paraguay to offer guidance for Syria's constitutional moment.

Paraguay was ruled by a military dictatorship from 1954 to 1989. After the regime's fall, a new constitution was drafted in 1992. Bogado participated in that process and recalls intense resistance from politicians eager to retain control over media. What ultimately tipped the balance, he argues, was public opinion. The media had played a central role in mobilising resistance to dictatorship, and that legitimacy gave journalists leverage during constitutional negotiations.

Bogado points to six constitutional articles that explicitly protect press freedom, prohibit government interference, and guarantee the public's right to information. These provisions, he stresses, were only meaningful because they were clearly written and publicly understood. "If you leave interpretation to the government," he warns, "it will probably mean absolutely nothing."

Syria's current transitional framework includes a brief guarantee of freedom of expression under [Article 13](#), but Bogado sees this as only a starting point. He argues that durable press freedom requires explicit constitutional protections: banning government closure of media outlets, enumerating journalists' rights, limiting liability to civil – not criminal – matters, protecting sources, guaranteeing pluralism, and ensuring state media serves all political and social groups.

Yet law alone is insufficient. Bogado emphasises that journalists must actively cultivate public support. Accountability cannot be enforced by media acting alone; it depends on a society that values information and understands its stake in press freedom. Journalists, he argues, must work "side by side" with citizens to build this culture.

Like Gabeira, Bogado also warns against proximity to power. Journalists should act as a counter-power, not partners of the state, and remain wary of wealthy investors seeking influence in exchange for stability. At the same time, he sees opportunity: journalists returning from exile carry skills, technologies, and global perspectives that enable them to build independent media outside traditional ownership structures.

Conclusion

Going into this project, my sense was that my feelings and fears were mine alone. Through conversations with 10 Syrian journalists, and three exiled from other countries, I now see that our upheaval is a collective experience that influences the entire operation around news production.

Syrian journalists contemplating or navigating a return to the homeland will need to be prepared on many different fronts: financially, emotionally, professionally, socially and legally.

It may be wise to maintain some elements of the life you have built elsewhere – keep your exile connections and hard-won documentation.

When you arrive for the first time, do not be alarmed if you find there is grief to be processed: the home you left is gone, and the person you were has changed. Neither can be retrieved by returning.

Be ready for hard work: there is trust to be built with audiences and publics who were once portrayed as enemies. Re-education may be required.

Dr Feinstein said these aspects of negotiating return are not solely the responsibility of journalists. He calls on newsroom leaders to educate their journalists about [moral injury](#), to have check-ins before and during assignment deployment, and to hold debriefs afterwards.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Benkelman, S. (2024, March 21). [How moral injury is impacting the news industry and what you can do about it](#). American Press Institute.

“The editors, the managers are going to be having very similar feelings as well,” he said. “They’re not immune to what you feel as a journalist. This is going to go all the way up through your organisation. It’s going to go all the way up through your society. You’re just a reflection of Syrian society.”

Journalists who have returned and those who remained and even those who will live on in exile will require sustained psychological support to shoulder the immense job that lies ahead of them. By paying attention to what we need to metabolise in this chapter, we create room for society to do the same. “[We can] introduce what pain is, what grief is,” said Kholoud Helmi.

The implications for journalism extend beyond individual return. The ethical norms, editorial practices, and institutional protections established during this transitional period will shape the character of Syria’s emerging public sphere. Whether journalism becomes a force for accountability and shared reality, or is gradually absorbed into systems of managed consent, will depend not only on political developments but on the collective resolve of journalists, editors, newsroom leaders, and the publics they serve. In this sense, return is not merely a personal decision; it is a structural moment in the making of Syria’s future media culture.

I want to acknowledge that the bloody events that followed the fall of Assaad in the coastal areas and Suwayda broke the morale of many Syrian journalists. Layered onto the long-standing trauma Syrians have endured, these events raised urgent questions about coexistence and unity. Where some had cautious optimism, there is now ambivalence, and a notable rise in pessimism on social media.

There is no better and no worse time to be a Syrian journalist.

To those from the global news industry looking to support us, please offer training programmes, mentorship, therapeutic support or funding for independent outlets. Please also continue to cover Syria and bring global attention to Syrians' rights. If you are a well-funded foreign news outlet, you can meet both of these requests by hiring talented young Syrian journalists.

A final note to my fellow Syrian journalists. The work is difficult, and the risks are real, but the stories waiting to be told are everywhere. Journalism carried out with integrity may not resolve political uncertainty, yet it can help resist the return of silence. The grief Syrians have yet to process is heavy. If this work is done carefully and collectively, it may help ensure that what happened is not denied or repeated.