Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper
University of Oxford

# Syria's Missing Narratives

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## Acknowledgements

# Table of contents:

# 1. Introduction

*"There is no voice louder than the voice of the battle.*
*Everything for the sake of the battle…*
*Opinions are oppressed for the sake of the battle."*

*Egyptian Poet Ahmed Fouad Nagm*

The conflict in Syria is the worst conflict since WWII. There are at least two dozen countries involved in the fighting there. The humanitarian and security situation continue to deteriorate, with the death toll now topping 500,000 and over half of the population displaced. The bloody episodes and terrible tragedies over the past five years have cast a shadow on the local initiatives that were having an impact on the lives of thousands of residents. Reconciliation initiatives seem only to attract media attention when and if there is an international involvement. Local and active social actors have been marginalised by the media at the expense of high-level officials and active participants in the fighting who relay defiant and uncompromising messages from the country.

Social actors have been powerful in their community, but failing to express extreme, stereotypical, violent or confrontational views, they have been neglected by both national and international media. If reported, they would have possibly provided a deeper understanding of the intricate tapestry of various communities and the complexity of the conflict along non-religious lines. But more crucially, the wider context and positive instances of connectedness could have shed light on the dynamics and social forces which have kept Syrian communities interwoven.

In this paper, I explore the reasons that have led to the media marginalisation of civil society actors and locally based initiatives. The case study of the town of Barzeh, which endured brutal unrest and battles and thereafter witnessed a peace process, provides an insight into how local, regional and international media outlets used a war framing when covering the reconciliation initiative, including by largely ignoring the participants in the peace deal.

## 2. Syria and the media

Drenched in blood, being swayed from side to side by a group of young men screaming "God is great" under the raining bullets, the body of deceased Mahmoud Jawabra was the first horrifying footage to appear from Syria in decades. Jawabra is widely believed to be the first casualty of the uprising against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in March 2011. Security forces killed him during a protest in the southern province of Deraa.

In a country that was once considered one of the most stable countries in a rather turbulent Middle East, March 2011 was a historical turning point for Syria. It was when thousands of Syrian people took to the streets to protest against a five-decade-old dictatorial rule, inspired by protests elsewhere in the Arab World. The regime of Assad responded with a brutal crackdown. In just the first eight weeks of the uprising, more than 1,000 protesters were killed (Al Jazeera English; 2011). Thousands of protest organisers and participants were arrested (Shadid; 2011).

From the early days of the revolution, the regime took several measures to control the flow of information outside the country.  The bureaus of international news agencies in the capital, Damascus, were forced to shut down, and journalists were kicked out, while others were intimidated and arrested. Meanwhile, local media, which had predominantly been either controlled or sponsored by the government, adopted a blind eye strategy throughout most of the first year of the uprising. The regular morning aerobics segment or the "explore Syria's nature" programme were never interrupted by reports of protests or blood spilling in the streets of raging towns. The first time Syrian TV acknowledged the presence of a mass gathering in the capital was six weeks into the uprising, when the anchor of the news bulletin announced these were not protesters but worshippers gathering to thank God for the rainfall (Zaman al-Wasel, 2011). Dark humour is how that television moment was described.

To fight the information blackout, dozens of ordinary civilians, mostly with little to no media experience, found themselves compelled to document the protests and the ensuing crackdown. They captured low-resolution photos and shot shaky videos using their mobile phones that were then circulated on social media and picked up by journalists to be published in regional and international outlets. Reporters also reached out to activists to interview by Skype or satellite phones about the conditions on the ground.

In short, an exceptional amount of what the outside world knows—or thinks it knows—about what was happening in the country came from content circulated by activists on social networks (Lynch, Freelon, Sean; 2014). When Assad troops began using heavy machinery, activists showed the world what was happening in the country in real time using video streaming services such as Livestream and Bambuser[1]. The footage was used by several international news organisations including Al Jazeera, CNN, the BBC and Sky News. Bambuser, which -by the company's estimates- had been used by up to 200 activists in the country within a year, was blocked by the Syrian government in February 2012 (Devereaux; 2012). But activists always found a way around the blackout by using new services and methods to deliver their messages.

The uprising started taking an even bloodier turn when many of those opposing Assad took up arms to fight back against the crackdown, and dozens of army personnel defected to join the ranks of the dissidents. The defections, dozens of them, were filmed and uploaded to YouTube. So were the formation of new rebel battalions by the defectors and novice fighters (Atassi; 2012). The violence reached new levels in 2012. Activists were now transmitting to the world massacres, intense battles, artillery shelling and aerial bombardment.

The majority of international media networks found themselves compelled to change the branding of what was happening in Syria from "The Syrian uprising/Revolution" to "the Syrian civil war". What was happening in the country did fit the widely accepted political science definition of a civil war as 1,000 combat deaths a year (Melvin, Singer; 1980). By the end of 2011, over 5,000 people were killed in the crackdown and the fighting.

Now five years on, the humanitarian and security situation in Syria continue to deteriorate. Assad's warplanes continue to bombard residential areas in towns under the control of the opposition and kill dozens of civilians daily. Self-declared jihadists continue to terrorise activists, and the world, by kidnapping and beheading those they do not agree with. Thousands of civilians live in areas besieged by warriors, struggling to feed themselves.

Through the surge of violence, however, demonstrations were still underway in relatively safe areas but only when the fighting or the shelling toned down in flashpoint areas. More importantly, there was a rise of civil society initiatives and informal organisations. Informal localised peace deals and reconciliation initiatives meant to ease people's lives during the conflict were up and running.

A study by the London School of Economics located more than 35 reconciliation initiatives in the country between 2011 and 2014 (Turkmani, Kaldor et al; 2014). However, these initiatives that would affect the lives of thousands of residents of areas seldom dominated the news. Peace initiatives would only get extensive media coverage if there were a prominent international involvement, like the Geneva conferences and talks in Moscow.

Peace deals on the ground were spearheaded by civil society groups, with the support of influential social actors. The upsurge of these entities was a remarkable development for a country where most of civil society groups had been either banned or controlled by the government. No groups with political or advocacy agenda were allowed to operate inside the country (Ahmado; 2013). However, when the uprising erupted in Syria 2011, the power of the state became contested, paving the way for an awakening of civil society on all levels.

However, local and active social actors were marginalised by the media at the expense of high-level officials and active participants in the fighting who relayed defiant and uncompromising messages from the country. They were neglected by both national and international media for failing to express extreme and stereotypical views. Shedding the light on their work and ideas would have possibly provided a better understanding of forces that kept communities together and of the wider conflict along non-religious non-sectarian lines.

# 3. Civil Society/Local actors

The years 2011 and 2012, in particular, witnessed the emergence of political truth-telling into the public sphere. People who once operated in the shadows were now setting up organisations in broad daylight. Informal local coordination groups blossomed. They delivered a variety of new activities, especially to people or areas considered hostile to the regime of Assad. At often a considerable personal risk, they set up field hospitals and provided educational and other services to Syrians in need. They also reported to foreign media and NGOs on the human rights situation (Boseman, 2012). "In every town or village that fell out of Assad's control, small civil society groups are working tirelessly to lay the foundations for democracy, justice and a pluralistic society," Syrian journalist Hania Mourtada (2015) wrote:

"Young people, in particular, are determined to show the world that they can build solid institutions from scratch and reinstate order in opposition-controlled towns.  Centres concerned with women's rights and women's well-being have opened their doors, offering language courses to illiterate women and useful marketable skills to the young. Subversive graffiti, revolutionary pamphlets, magazines and radio stations, groups offering psycho-social support and makeshift hospitals are all initiatives made possible by Syria's new and burgeoning civil society."

More crucially, these groups have benefited from the breakdown of the repressive security authority in many areas and have come together with the traditional leaderships to become important players in brokering and supporting local peace deals and reconciliation initiatives meant to ease people's lives during the conflict.

A recent survey of Civil Society groups in rebel-held areas counted as many as 80 groups in the five main rebel-held or contested provinces (Aleppo, Idlib, Deir az-Zor, Raqqa and Hama).  "The civil councils have been playing a key communicative role between the armed groups and the local community on one side, and the armed groups and the mediators trying to broker ceasefires," the authors of the report said (Haspeslagh and Yousuf; 2015).

The research into the work of civil society found that these groups

"embodied a strong potential for positive change inspired by the notions of justice, equality, freedom, democracy and citizenship. The emergence of civil society has already contributed to containing the process of fragmentation along ethnic, sectarian, political and ideological lines, and continued to do so today despite the prevailing climate of violence." (Haspeslagh and Yousuf; 2015)

In addition to the councils, religious figures, professionals (such as medics and teachers) and technocrats have all played an instrumental role in shaping community relations, existing as powerful actors and change agents that maintained peace-building efforts at a grassroots level. Traders and local businessmen who fear yet more destruction to their businesses became increasingly engaged in the brokering of local deals or in exerting pressure to armed groups to accept ceasefires (Turkmani, Kaldor et al; 2014). These actors supported civil society initiatives that reject political polarisation and armed victories.

Muslim and Christian figures, aware of what moves and motivates people on a social and spiritual level and well informed of the needs of the people, have carried out successful peacebuilding interventions. In 2013, for example, following tit-for-tat kidnappings between the Sunni and minority Christian community in the city of Qusair in Homs province, Father Paulo's visit to the then rebel-dominated city was essential for mending relations between the communities. Father Paulo slept at the Sunni rebel's headquarters and had dinners with them. "Tensions dramatically eased," resident and activist Hadi al-Abdullah recalls. Pictures of the respected figure were circulated on social media. The kidnapped on both sides were released thereafter.

In Yabroud, a town in the suburbs of Damascus, grassroots civil society organisations and local religious actors played a crucial role in making sure the Sunni and Christian communities - which are almost equal in size in the town - continued to coexist peacefully despite the raging violence between government troops and rebels, increased presence of religious extremist elements within the rebels, and the steep decline in economic resources in the city.

An instance where regional and international media clearly downplayed the religious coexistence, and the role of religious figures in favour of coverage of inter-communal aggression committed by extremist elements was clearly visible after February 2014, when a group of self-declared jihadists stormed one of the historically most important churches in the country. The extremist group dismantled and broke into pieces the crucifix perched on top of the building and destroyed the sacred statues decorating the interior (Fisk 2014). The incident went viral in both Arabic and Western media. Dozens of articles spoke of "sectarian strife" between Muslims and Christians and warned of "Christians facing extinction" in the multi-religious town. Much of the media reports focused on the attacks and persecution of the Christian community in Yabroud and neglected to mention that the town's two main churches had remained open to Christian worshippers for the

entire duration of the conflict, even while the town had been under the control of al-Qaeda's Syrian branch, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other Islamist rebels.

Reports further failed to mention that during the most violent and dangerous periods of combat, worshippers braved the fire to attend Sunday mass and that St. Mary's Greek Catholic Church was the first place of worship in Syria to host a fast-breaking meal during the holy month of Ramadan for all Muslims, including rebel fighters (Marlow, 2013). If reported, they would have possibly provided a deeper understanding of the intricate tapestry of the religious communities in Yabroud and the complexity of the conflict along non-religious lines. However, more crucially, the wider context and positive instances of connectedness could have shed light on the dynamics and social forces which have kept communities interwoven.

## 4. Hungry for peace

Aside from the raging violence in the country, there is something to be said about the resilience of the Syrian population, the millions who stayed in the country to carry on some semblance of normal life, who leave their homes after the barrage of bombardment to open their shops, those who evacuate the injured in the morning and attend an English language class in the evening, and those who are hungry for peace in their country.

There have been several attempts to gather views of residents from the ground despite the logistical and security situation. These polls showed that Syrians were keen to have peace and normality. A study by Omran for Strategic Studies (2014) found that of the nearly 1,000 people surveyed, the majority supported local peace agreements. A survey carried out by Charney Research (2015) showed that while people have indeed become more polarised and were less willing to support high-level talks between regime and opposition officials, they were more open to grass-root local reconciliation initiatives that will facilitate their lives and eventually lead to a Syrian-led national resolution.

It is thus important to highlight the resources available for these initiatives, which are taking place and could be the grounds on which they can build up a peaceful society in the future. It is important to show that from within the rubble, there is a glimmer of hope.

There has been a growing recognition of the important role media can play not only in instigating and fuelling conflicts, but also in ending violence. Media scholars argue that peace initiatives are more likely to succeed when carried out in an environment conducive to reconciliation (McGoldrick and Lynch, 2000; Wolfsfeld, 2004).

"If you want to de-escalate the conflict, you have to start from the local level and build local truces, arrangements, just to stabilise the situation because people are exhausted after four years of conflict and the human cost of it is huge," Boris Michel (2015), the former head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegation in Syria, told the Reuters news agency. "We are increasingly working to support the reconciliation process and offer services to make them (truces) happen," he added. "This is part of the process for a better Syria in the future, whatever the political outcome is."

According to Relief and Reconciliation for Syria, peacebuilding has to start at the local level, adding that "the corruption of society through war and violence can only be tackled by its own moral forces. They have to strike the balance between justice and peace, between truth and mercy". A survey by Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (2015) showed that the majority of participants said trusted mediators of peace initiatives included "religious and tribal leaders, families of martyrs, representatives from minority groups, and local council leaders. Participants also mentioned educated people like lawyers, doctors, and teachers as potential mediators. These types of potential mediators were positively viewed and trusted by both sides."

Media can empower actors and shed light on creative peace initiatives that pave the way towards establishing peace. After all, during conflicts, politicians may not be the most likely source of ideas capable of changing a situation. McGoldrick and Lynch (2000) argue peace deals are likely to be successful when preceded by years of groundwork that aims to prepare people in conflict-hit areas for the changes they will have to make if they are to live in peace (social negotiations).
"This is where journalists constantly exploring and assessing peace ideas can help to create the conditions for peace while also bringing their readers and audiences important and interesting stories," the authors argue.

Wolfsfeld (2004) says media can have an influence on the political atmosphere surrounding the process. He likens a peace process to a financial investment, saying that while people recognise the risk associated with investments, they are more likely to put their money in the stock market when everyone is talking about favourable market conditions. Similarly, residents are more likely to support peace processes when the general atmosphere is optimistic towards them.

## 5. War journalism

There are structural problems within the news industry that lend themselves to the marginalisation of local civil society actors and reconciliation initiatives in general. A major one is that conflict and violence are the backbone of the news industry (Wolfsfeld; 2014). Journalists and editors generally assume that the public is more interested in war activities and armed groups than peace initiatives and movements for peace (Hamelink; 2015). This is especially the case when it comes to TV. The coverage for broadcast is very much dictated by the presence of compelling images to accompany the event. "We are more reluctant to cover stories from Syria that are not accompanied by 'good' footage. That is the case for Syria especially, where we have the opportunity to select from a large pool of footage we receive every day," an editor from a major international media organisation told me in an interview.

However, even print journalism seems to opt for dramatic images of war and a matching headline. A study analysing photographs of the Syrian conflict published in two news magazines between 2011–2012 found that the dominant visual frame of conflict was through images of active fighting and victims instead of the affected bystanders or efforts to negotiate peace (Greenwood; 2013).

The eagerness of the newsroom to have dramatic coverage of the conflict encourages journalists to run to the gunfire and explosions as residents are running in the opposite direction. A journalist working for a major international media network based in Syria told me that while his organisation continuously caution him against travelling too close to the battle, he receives commendation when he comes out with footage where the fighting is too close or the camera is shaking from the gravity of explosions.

The whole industry encourages the reporting of violence; most of the international awards that went to journalists covering Syria over the past few years went to journalists who embedded themselves with rebels and covered the fighting. A war journalist is the most prestigious level a reporter can reach. Vice News, an online channel that launched in 2014, has been applauded for its 'raw' and 'real' coverage of the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, with its reporters diving right into the frontlines as residents are driving in the opposition direction.

But what about when the battles wane and those residents go back to what is left of their homes? "It is now the journalists who are heading in the opposition direction - with no drama or action-

packed story left to tell as the smoke clears. They leave in search of the next war zone," said Virgil Hawkins (2015), a researcher in journalism studies.

The Syrian town of Barzeh (the case study will be discussed at length below) had been a flashpoint area during the first three years of the conflict. Dozens of cases of footage of the conflict have been shared online by activists and later picked up by major international and regional news networks. But since reconciliation was struck and the battles subdued, little has been written to describe the situation of residents there. This deep-seated bias, Robert W McChesney (2010) argues, is not due to 'morally bankrupt' or 'untalented journalists'. 'It's the structure of journalism', he says.

In fact, most reputable journalists and news organisations always aspire to cover conflicts and wars in an objective manner, giving voices to the different sides of the conflicts and representing events in the most accurate way possible. But it's exactly news organisation's attempts to report on wars *objectively* that lead to the marginalisation of civil society actors, their reconciliation initiatives and peace processes. Lynch and McGoldrick argue that there are three ways in which news said to be objective fuels further violence. "Three conventions of objective reporting, in particular, are predisposed towards War Journalism. Their 'natural drift', as it were, is to lead us – or leave us – to over-value violent, reactive responses to conflict, and under-value non-violent, developmental ones: • A bias in favour of official sources • A bias in favour of event over process • A bias in favour of 'dualism' in reporting conflicts" (Lynch and McGoldrick 2005).

**Bias towards events**

Political science scholar Gadi Wolfsfeld (2004) speaks of a "fundamental contradiction between the nature of a peace process and news values; the media often play a destructive role in attempts at making peace." He says that editors in news organisations tend to prefer stories to others based on four values: immediacy, drama, simplicity and ethnocentrism. These values make it difficult to use the media for peace.

Peace deals can be long processes involving gradual progress that is not sudden or unexpected, and that can put off editors. This, however, does not mean that they are uneventful or not newsworthy either. Peace deals do not begin and end with the signing of an agreement. Their implementation carries several possible newsworthy events. These include the withdrawal and/or the disarmament of troops and the establishment of a new military, political and/or legal arrangement. Moreover, a

plethora of stories could be covered on post-conflict development and administration and human tales about life after war (Hawkins, 2015).

"The problem is that news is, by its very nature, preoccupied with change, yet it has a very fixed and one-dimensional understanding of how change comes about. Built into it is an orientation in favour of realism and ignores the insights of Peace and Conflict Studies, which argue that there are many ways to bring about change in a conflict, many 'levers' to pull," McGoldrick (2006) writes.

Another aspect of the nature of peace-related news is their relative complexity compared to short-term violence events carried out by active fighters. The coverage of reconciliation, for example, requires a deeper understanding of the existing political structures and the dynamics among different social actors.

**Bias towards officials**

When it comes to the Syrian conflict, media organisations received their 'facts' from the government-sponsored media and from the powerful armed rebel organisations that produced high-quality footage of beheadings, battles and victories. The 'official' actors in the conflict have, throughout the past five years, adopted an uncompromising narrative of 'us' vs. 'them'. For the government, reconciliation occurs when "misled" and "disillusioned" rebels decide to go back to their senses and surrender their weapons to the authorities. For the influential rebel groups, direct negotiations with the government are considered a "betrayal for the blood of the martyrs" killed by the regime.

The media generally have left out from the Syrian scene a layer of influential actors in different communities who worked on peace initiatives and helped in making "life go on" for large segments of the population that remained in the country (Turkmani, Kaldor et al; 2014). These actors include teachers, doctors, religious leaders and retired generals. These people are rarely featured in media. Instead, TV airtime and newspaper pages have been filled with political analysts from Damascus who were far away from the regime's decision-making and reconciliation initiatives, and opposition leaders in Turkey and Europe who were detached from the ground mainly reiterating revolutionary defiant slogans. Journalists have found it efficient, accessible and striking to use the material provided by the powerful groups in the conflict.

The observation is consistent with empirical evidence supporting the theory that media are influenced by powerful elites. A study by Peter Golding and Philip Elliot (1979) showed that "even in highly equipped and financed news organisations there is an enormous reliance on the news gathering of agencies and on a few prominent institutional sources". By relying on the powerful parties of the conflict for their reporting, media organisations- unintentionally or intentionally- fed the media war that the parties were engaged in. "Media organisation's airing of our videos is more important than the war itself," Abu Ahmad, a rebel leader from the suburbs of Hama in central Syria, told me in an interview in 2013. Armed groups have posted videos of their battles, of their arms and talking heads, not just in an attempt to win the hearts and minds of their followers or to instil fear in the heart of their enemies, but also to raise funds from private and state-sponsored donors.

Regional Gulf countries were largely the main source of funding to rebel groups. Dickinson (2013), who carried out a research on funding to rebels coming from Kuwait, said that in early 2012, there was an explosion of videos, tweets, and photos on social media, announcing the creation of new rebel brigades—some even named after individual Kuwaitis who had contributed money to the rebels.

In turn, the money raised was not only used to fund battles but also to create media centres and hire press officers and media activists that filmed battles, managed their social media accounts and built relations with mainstream media journalists in the hope that their material would make it to their outlets. And they succeeded. Mainstream media organisations who had no reporters on the ground relied heavily on the usually compelling images that make "great TV" or clickable online stories.
In short, the resources that armed groups had were unmatched by those of independent civilian activists who struggled to survive in harsh economic conditions. Getting the word out in Syria can be expensive. Due to the scarcity created by the war of landlines, cell phone lines and electricity, communication equipment such as satellite phones and electrical generators are needed, items which can be way beyond a normal citizen's budget.

But financial support to combatants comes at a price. Fighters found themselves trying to appease donors and potential donors not only through fighting 'popular' battles on high profile fronts. They also adapted their ideologies to donor preferences. A large sum of money that came to rebels was from conservative Sunni clerics (salafists) who expected their beneficiaries to utter sectarian statements and grow beards when initially these fighters had no ideological grounding for their struggle (Dickinson, 2013).

A TV interview with Sheikh Abu Harith al-Khalidi, a resident of the then besieged Homs areas chosen to be the representative of civilians and wounded during negotiations with the Assad regime, highlights the way their money tampered with reality on the ground. In the interview, translated from Arabic and quoted by a recent study, al-Khalidi said:

"I would summarise it in two words. The party primarily responsible for what is happening to the besieged Homs is the donors; donors are responsible for what is happening in besieged Homs, for they have politicised the revolution. They have politicised the revolution with either their ideologies or their intellectual or factious affiliation. They recruited people inside to serve their own agendas, in other words, they have emptied the revolution of its real value, emptied the revolution of its content. The main responsibility for what is happening in besieged Homs and the betrayal of besieged Homs are the donors. Donors disrupt effective military operations, then they themselves give the order and support for battles that do not even exist…They launched virtual military operations [battles which exist mainly in pictures and videos on social media pages but have hardly any presence on the ground]." (Souria Ash-Shaab TV interview 2014)

Local media rarely rely on the voices of members of civil society when reporting about reconciliation efforts or peace deals, even when social actors are the driving force behind the deals. In fact, following the reconciliation initiative in Barzeh in 2014, not a single article published about the process quoted the civil society groups involved. Instead, the news articles included interviews with officials who used defying us-versus-them rhetoric.

Amid the hostile climate of public opinion generated by the media, reconciliatory voices became hugely unpopular. One example is the massive campaign by pro-government supporters against the governor of Homs who participated in a reconciliation attempt in November 2012 with the rebels in the town of Tal Kalakh. Syria-based journalist, Ibrahim Hamdan (2012), said there was a "large number of attacks against the governor, including accusing him of treason and collaboration with terrorists. Some even said that he was facilitating the work of terrorists, especially after his visit to Tal Kalakh with the reconciliation committee and the [state] media."

An uneasy truce finally took hold in June 2014. It was the local elders of various sects who pushed the idea of reconciliation between the regime forces and rebel groups. Many ex-fighters, including a former Free Syrian Army commander known by his nickname, Abu Uday, appear to have made their peace with the process. "They say I was given 5 million Syrian pounds to sign the [reconciliation] papers," Abu Uday said during an interview with the Los Angeles Times, citing an amount equivalent to about $35,000. He and others face threats from their former colleagues-in-arms, never far from Tal Khalakh. "They call me a traitor," said Khaled Eid, who is again on speaking terms with his father and is studying law and helping out at the family's fragrance shop in town. "I don't care about it. I did what I did."

Not only are journalists inclined to interview political leaders, they also tend to favour interviewing "fundamentalists with extremist views" because such interviews are believed to attract the interest of the public more than interviews with moderate figures (Wolfsfeld, 1997).

John Alderdice, a Northern Ireland politician, who was the leader of the Alliance Party, formed in 1970 as an alternative to sectarian politics during the conflict in Northern Ireland, said politicians from his party struggled to make themselves heard. "The party was very much committed to peace and reconciliation. The frustrating thing was how difficult it was to get serious interest in such a thing. It was much easier and much more attractive for them to pay attention to the extreme voices. Media would argue that these were the ones who had the most support. But in fact in the early days they didn't have support as much as the more moderate parties," Alderdice said.

Moreover, Alderdice (2015) argued that there was "remarkably little investigative journalism on some of the extremist leaders", either out of journalist's fear for their safety if they ask unfriendly questions, or because they were keen to keep good relations with these people to get stories.
In June 2015, Al Jazeera interviewed the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's arm in Syria, in an undisclosed location in northern the country. The channel has been the only one to gain access to the leader of the group, Abu Mohammad al-Joulani, twice. The interviews were criticised for being "real softball". "It was no Frost/Nixon, more like a high school date," Aron Lund (2015), editor of Syria in Crisis, said.

**Duality of conflict**

One way journalists try to protect themselves against accusations of bias towards a party is to 'hear both sides' of the story (McGoldrick 2006). However, this means that multi-party initiatives and issues are excluded from the reporting. "Dualism is a key part of objectivity but also, for these reasons, a major contributory factor in the way in which it escalates a conflict, by turning it into a tug of war in which each party faces only two alternatives – victory or defeat," McGoldrick writes.
In Syria, not only was the home-grown narrative of political change and justice quickly evaporating, but also regional and international media organisations began framing what was happening in the country as a sectarian war. It became about Sunni Muslims, who make up the majority of the country, fighting the Alawite-dominated regime of Assad. The conflict, in short, was increasingly framed by the media as a sectarian war.

Dynamic multi-dimensional relationships among different actors in society have been reduced to and defined by "the sole objective of sustaining enmity" (Colman et al; 2011). Media organisations tended to define Syrians by their religious affiliations and were enslaved to a one-dimensional structure of conflict based on sects (Sunni vs Alawite). Interreligious cooperation was invisible to most journalists because it did not fit the main framing of the conflict, namely that what was happening in Syria was a sectarian war. The sympathy of a high-profile member of the Alawite sect for the rebels was publicised as a "defection". Christian Syrians were treated as a threatened community with little agency.

That is not to say that there was no salient element of sectarianism in the conflict. It is true that the decision makers in Assad's regime were dominated by Alawites and many within the rebel ranks were increasingly turning to religious rhetoric to draw strength and mobilisation (Hawkins; 2014). Moreover, by mid-2012, the northern rebel-held areas were increasingly being taken over by Islamist-declared rebels who increasingly used sectarian rhetoric.

However, sect was far from the only dividing line. Political ideology motivated some Alawites, Christians and Kurds to join the opposition ranks in 2011. Sunni tribes meanwhile were divided between supporters and opponents of Assad. Many were driven by economic benefit. Traditional tribes such as the Ageidat, Hadidiyin, and Beni Khalid were more marginalised under Assad and backed the opposition, while the Baggara, who thrived under his rule, continued to back their patron (Zambelis; 2015).

Economic motivation was also important elsewhere. On the regime side, numerous Sunni bureaucrats dependent on government pay checks remained loyal, as did many in the middle classes, including conservative Sunni merchants in Damascus and Aleppo, even if some secretly aided the opposition. While this loyalty or neutrality was doubtless also influenced by regime intimidation – some merchants considering strike action had their shops forcibly opened – their relative passivity did seem to follow an economic logic (Zambelis; 2015).

Moreover, of the 10 million Syrians displaced by the violence, the majority moved to multi-sectarian areas inside the country.  At least two million displaced people from Sunni areas are now settled in either Tartus, which is predominantly occupied by Alawites, or Latakia, which has a sizable Alawite population and is Assad's hometown. However, their coexistence has rarely been portrayed by the

media and framing the conflict as sectarian further undermined the importance of social actors whose role did not fit within the mainstream narrative.

The polarisation in Syria soon after the conflict between regime troops and rebels escalated reduced people to "Pro-Assad" and "Anti-Assad", while those who refused to identify with either side, the so-called "third wave" people became the target of accusation of being traitors or unprincipled by both sides.

# 6. Peace Journalism Model

As we have seen, research has consistently shown that media organisations favour covering news about wars and conflicts over news of peace deals and peace initiatives. It has also shown that views expressed by fighters and high-level political actors are more likely to be reported as opposed to views expressed by civil society actors and local peacemakers. The paradigm through which mainstream media report the news about conflicts is a one that focuses on military gains and losses and is rooted in an "us-versus-them" system. This is what Jake Lynch and Johan Galtung, the authors of Reporting Conflict: New Directions in Peace Journalism, label as "war journalism".

They contrast this with "peace journalism", which they say is when journalists still report conflicts, but focus more on the opportunities that exist within the conflict. Peace journalists seek "particularly creative, new ideas asking whether such ideas can be sufficiently powerful to prevent violence" (Buller; 2011). Peace journalists do not avoid reporting conflict entirely. Rather, they are called on to report violence, but also to pay particular attention to the "invisible effects, such as psychological damage and trauma" and to address "consequences for political discourses like the receptiveness to narratives of victimhood and revenge, and the wish for more glory" (Buller; 2011). Peace journalism does not mean ignoring violence (Lynch and McGoldrick; 2005). In fact, Lynch and Galtung (2010) consider Peace Journalism as analogous to "health journalism", which draws attention to disease but also explores the causes and highlights possible preventative, as well as curative measures. They describe War Journalism as "sports journalism" where "winning is not everything, it is the only thing" (Lynch and Galtung, 2010).

Galtung (1986, 1998) classifies War Journalism and Peace Journalism as based on four orientations: (1) peace/war (2) truth/propaganda, (3) people/elites, and (4) solutions /victory (cited in Lynch, McGoldrick, 2005). Jake Lynch and Johan Galtung go further and spell out the significant differences between the two. They include a detailed table that compares war journalism and peace journalism, one which defines war journalism as "violence-victory oriented" while peace journalism is "conflict-solution oriented." War journalism is "propaganda-oriented" and peace journalism is "truth-oriented." Where war journalism is "elite-oriented," peace journalism is "people-oriented," and war journalism is "victory-oriented" and peace journalism is "solution-oriented" (Buller, 2011).

Based on this model, this research now analyses the coverage of the conflict and peace process in Barzeh, a town in the suburbs of Damascus. It looks at reports from local, regional and international media.

## 7. Case study of Barzeh

Barzeh is a municipality and a neighbourhood situated in Damascus' northeast. The area was a protest hub in the early months of the uprising and the site of some of the country's most intense battles between Assad troops and opposition fighters. The main frontline of the fighting has been rebel-held Barzeh and Esh el-Warwar, two areas that are mainly occupied by residents supportive of the Assad regime.

Tensions between the population of both neighbourhoods stretch back to the 1970s shortly after the late president Hafez al-Assad seized power in Damascus. Authorities back then confiscated the lands of the original inhabitants of Barzeh to build Esh el-Warwar and Dahiyat al-Assad, two neighbourhoods that became occupied by an influx of a new class of government employees and military officers from Alawite sect. The compensation for the original inhabitants was trivial to non-existent (Hassan, 2015).

There are some reports that the angry residents of Barzeh staged protests against the Assad regime in 1975 and 1982 but were met with a brutal crackdown. Narratives of violence from that era continue to circulate until this day among the people of Barzeh.

In April 2011, protests erupted in Barzeh, just a few weeks after the initial protests broke out in the city of Deraa. Demonstrations were met with violence, and dozens of videos emerged of the rallies and the ensuing crackdown.  The crackdown on the protest movement was carried out by locals from Esh el-Warwar, who were organised and mobilised by the neighbourhood's leader, and at a later stage by government paramilitaries from Esh el-Warwar and Dahyet al-Assad.

At least 15 people were killed in the first 10 days, according to the Local Coordination Committees. The protests turned into armed clashes between the local pro-Assad militias - the National Defence Forces - and the armed opposition residents of Barzeh. The fighting erupted in February 2013 and peaked in the summer of that year. What started as street-to-street battles in the district developed into a fully-fledged war. The government used heavy weaponry -including tanks and warplanes- to rid the district of the rebels. The rebels, who are mostly natives of the town, relied on their knowledge of the district and their popular support to remain in control of their position (Institute for the Study of War; 2013).

The forces loyal to Assad included members of the National Defence forces from Esh el-Warwar and Dahyet al-Assad, in addition to the reported presence of members of the Iraqi Shia militia Abu al-Abbas al-Fadl and the Lebanese Shia group Hezbollah. These groups, in addition to the regime forces in central Damascus, imposed a partial siege around the town in March. Since then, Barzeh's markets were emptied from construction materials, medical supplies or even essential food and drink.  "The whole of Barzeh was on fire. The fighting was intense. The majority of residents were displaced to nearby districts," Abu al-Baraa, a resident of Damascus, told me. There were only a few families who remained in the district, in addition to the fighting groups.

The military situation reached a stalemate by the end of 2013. Dozens were being killed every day. The rebels were positioned inside it and were its de facto rulers. For them, maintaining their positions was a success. After all, they controlled part of the Syrian capital, which was, beside the strategic importance of the district, a symbolic victory.

The government wanted Barzeh and nearby Qaboun back. The rebels of Barzeh were blocking the main road connecting the capital to Esh el-Warwar and Dahyet al-Assad. Residents of these areas were forced to take a long route around Barzeh. It was also clear to the government and its supporting militias that they were exhausting their resources on a stationary front in this district (Turkmani et al; 2014).

On the other side, the opposition groups were facing immense shortages of supplies because of the siege. They were also facing pressure from families displaced outside the neighbourhood who wanted to return to their homes. The fighters were susceptible to pressure since they originated from the district and the civilians concerned were family, neighbours and other community members.

The government sent a number of delegations throughout 2013 to negotiate with the opposition forces. In December 2013, a truce committee was formed. It included members of the government, the opposition and notable community figures. The committee communicated for a month and met face-to-face outside Barzeh on a weekly basis.

On January 4, 2014, the Barzeh Local Coordination Committee announced a deal and spelt out its clauses. These included a cease-fire on both sides; the government's releasing detainees in government prisons; the opening of the main roads for Esh Alwarwar civilians and checkpoints

installed on the roads; families allowed to return after the repair of infrastructure and services; the FSA maintain their positions and their arms and control over the neighbourhood; the regular army retreat from any positions they hold within the neighbourhood, and especially from higher positions used for sniper fire (Turkmani et al; 2014).

"Despite several violations, the truce agreement reached in the Damascus neighbourhood of Barzeh and Qaboun in January 2014 is generally recognised as the most successful example to date. Due to the neighbourhood's strategic location adjacent to key government buildings and the highway, local rebels could exploit vulnerabilities of the Syrian government and the balance of power was more even than in other besieged locations," the Syria Institute (2016) reported.

"Life in the neighbourhood has returned to normal," Waseem Mahmoud, a 25-year-old opposition activist based in Barzeh, told Syria Direct (2014). "Shelling and all sorts of military operations have stopped, and the electricity, water and communications networks are back. People have started returning to the homes that they left. It has succeeded because of the long planning that went into it—the government had been designing this ceasefire for more than five months. In addition, most of the opposition forces present here are natives of the area. Neither side has violated any condition of the agreement," Mahmoud said.

**Barzeh and the media**

The formation of the committee and the ensuing interactions took place under a veil of secrecy. Abu Bara, who was involved in the talks, said no journalist and media activists were made aware of the meetings. "The involvement of media would not have allowed the talks to succeed," Abu Baraa said. Media coverage of the talks would have been destructive for two reasons, according to Abu Baraa. Firstly, participants in the talks may have been forced to give comments that are in line with the confrontational narrative that the parties had been utilising. The government delegation would frame the talk as a victory over the "surrendering" fighters. The opposition would say the regime's interest in negotiation came from the army's failure to take back Barzeh. The media escalation would only increase animosity and hurt the talks.

Secondly, Abu Bara says that the opposition was divided on whether they should enter into talks with the regime or not. There were some elements within the opposition who believed that any kind of talks with the government is a "betrayal to the blood of the martyrs" killed by regime forces. These groups tried to undermine the talks, labelling people who called for them "delusional" and - sarcastically "peace doves".  Abu Baraa said that these groups also had a strong military presence

and social media. "Trying to keep everything discreet until a deal is stuck was the best way to guarantee that it would be too late to use their powers," the activist said. The media blackout of the talks was largely successful, both in the period prior to the start of the negotiations and following the deal.

36 articles were published online about Barzeh in 2014 on websites belonging to local, regional and international media organisations. I analysed these articles based on the Peace Journalism Model. Textual analysis and empirical content analysis methods were utilised. The four frames of the Peace Journalism [Peace/Conflict, People, Truth, Solution] and the frames of the War Journalism [War, Elite, Propaganda, Victory] were determined based on the absence or presence of certain facts/analytical criteria.

The methodology I followed was that if the article included/mentioned the analytical criterion, it would be marked with Yes. If the article excluded/did not mention the factor, it was marked with No. Each Yes =1 point for the Peace Journalism frame. The number of the "Yes" determined the percentage of Peace Journalism framings, and the number of "No" determined the percentage of War Journalism framings.

The frames were identified in the following way:
1) Peace/conflict-oriented frame:

    a.   Does the article give background on historical grievances and on the protest movement?

    b.   Does it give voices to multiple parties?

    c.   Does it mention the positive benefits of the peace process?

    d.   Does it mention that the peace has been enduring?

2) Truth-oriented frame

    a.   Does it mention the compromises made on both sides?

    b.   Does it mention that the Syrian army and rebel groups are manning shared checkpoints?

    c.   Does it mention the local participation of different society actors?

3) People-oriented frame

    a.   Does it mention the suffering endured by both sides?

    b.   Does it interview local civilians?

4) Solution-oriented frame

a.        Does it mention reconciliation as part of a bigger solution?

The coding sheet and the results from the 36 articles can be found in the Appendix.  The total score for the articles' peace journalism was 3.8 out of 10, which shows that war journalism was the dominant framing of articles written about Barzeh in this period. None of the articles published on the Barzeh talks by pro-government media gave the context as to how the conflict in Syria in general, and Barzeh in particular, erupted. Nor did they provide any background on the tensions in the town before the uprising.  Official and semi-official media never spoke of protests against the government and often considered any reference to sectarian tensions as an act of sectarianism itself. In fact, the website of SANA news agency, the official state media, has not once mentioned the word "Alawite", the sect of President Assad, since it was set up in 1997. One may argue that local media do not tend to give much background while reporting on local issues because the assumption is that the audience is already aware of them. However, this does not apply when the content of pro-opposition media is examined. In fact, of the six articles that address the Barzeh talks, five explain the conflict by referring to the 2011 protests and the pre-existing tensions between the Sunni and Alawite communities.

What is common between the coverage of pro-government and anti-government local media is that none give voices to the opposing party and only two articles interview civilian residents about their conditions following the peace deal. On the other hand, local media that emerged after the uprising and that attempted to counter both the government and the opposition media succeeded in providing more context to the conflict and presenting the complexity of the conflict reconciliation process. This type of local media scored higher on the Peace Journalism Model than international media.

Regional media was polarised and scored very low on the Peace Journalism model, as low as the government-sponsored media. This can be explained by the fact that the conflict has spilled over outside the Syrian borders and that there has been heavy military involvement of regional paramilitary groups with the different sides of the conflict. What is also significant is that of the 11 articles written on the Barzeh peace initiative by regional media, only one saw the deal as a model that could be part of a bigger solution for the violence in Syria.

International media showed indicators of both war and peace journalism. The leftist media received the highest score for its peace reporting, undertaken by Patrick Cockburn of the Independent who

was on the ground in Barzeh. (3)  The Wall Street Journal also produced content that scored high on the Peace Journalism Model. (4)   However, Russia Today (5) and China's CCTV (6) scored the lowest, possibly because both outlets are state-owned, and both Moscow and Beijing are actively supportive of Assad.

# 8. Conclusion

The content analysis of the articles published on the peace initiative in Barzeh, dubbed the most successful locally-based deal since the conflict erupted in 2011 (the Syria Institute, 2016), showed that war journalism was the dominant framing. All of the articles published both by pro-government and pro-opposition media did not give voices to the opposing party nor did they highlight the suffering of civilian residents' prior to the deal or seek their views about their conditions following the peace deal.

Websites that emerged after the uprising, with the intention of making use of the collapse of the state to take freedom of speech to a new level, have succeeded in shedding the light on the opportunities that exist within this brutal conflict. These include Syria Deeply [7], Syria Direct [8], al-Jumhouriya [9] and online radios Souriali [10] and Rozana [11].

They have done better in terms of giving voices to civil society actors than the more established international media organisations. This type of media outlet is where creative new ideas for ending the war can be found. This fact should direct institutions interested in contributing to better journalism into supporting new media initiatives set up and operated by civil society.

Finally, Barry James, the editor of a study by UNESCO (2004), said that media fulfil their mission "not only when they achieve commercial success but when they contribute to a vibrant – and tolerant – civil society that invites dispute rather than quashing dissent. The function of the media is to inform, not conform – to create, in the words of Adlai Stevenson, 'a society where it is safe to be unpopular'."

Audiences and readers may or may not be interested in violence more than peace, but the question we should ask ourselves is: Is journalism a profession or a business? If journalism is really a business aiming at making money, then stop pretending it's a profession. If it's a profession, it's about informing and educating people, and maybe only a little bit of entertainment.

# Appendix

| | Media outlet | Media type | context/ Besieged | voices to multiple parties | Positive/ Mention reaps | Enduring peace | Mentions compromise/ reconciliation | shared checkpoints | local participation | Suffering of both sides | interviews locals | Part of bigger solution | Article score | Media type score |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Dampress | 1 | No | No | No | Yes | No | No | No | No | No | Yes | 2 | 2.6 |
| 2 | Khabar | 1 | No | No | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No | No | No | Yes | 4 | |
| 3 | Shabiba | 1 | No | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | 4 | |
| 4 | Tishrin | 1 | No | No | Yes | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | 1 | |
| 5 | SANA | 1 | No | No | Yes | Yes | No | No | No | No | No | No | 2 | |
| 6 | Damascus Media Centre | 2 | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | No | Yes | Yes | No | 5 | 3 |
| 7 | The Syrian | 2 | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | 8 | |
| 8 | All Syrians | 2 | Yes | No | Yes | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | 2 | |
| 9 | Zaman elWasl | 2 | Yes | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | 1 | |
| 10 | All 4 Syria | 2 | No | No | No | No | Yes | No | No | No | No | No | 1 | |
| 11 | Tamadon | 2 | Yes | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | 1 | |
| 12 | Syria News | 3 | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | No | Yes | No | No | No | No | 4 | 5.8 |

| # | Name | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 13 | Modon | 3 | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No | yes | Yes | 7 | |
| 14 | Al-Nour (Communist party) | 3 | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No | No | Yes | 5 | |
| 15 | Syria Deeply | 3 | Yes | Yes | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | No | 6 | |
| 16 | Syria Direct | 3 | Yes | No | Yes | yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | No | 7 | |
| 17 | Manar | 4 | No | No | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No | No | No | No | 3 | 2.73 |
| 18 | Al Akhbar alYom | 4 | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No | No | No | 4 | |
| 19 | Ahed | 4 | No | Yes | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | 1 | |
| 20 | Annahar | 4 | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | 0 | |
| 21 | Mayadeen | 4 | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | No | No | Yes | Yes | 6 | |
| 22 | Nashra | 4 | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | No | No | 5 | |
| 23 | Alam | 4 | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | 0 | |
| 24 | Press TV | 4 | No | No | Yes | Yes | No | No | No | No | No | No | 2 | |
| 25 | Al Jazeera | 4 | Yes | No | Yes | No | No | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | 4 | |
| 26 | AlAraby | 4 | Yes | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | 1 | |
| 27 | Al Akhbar | 4 | No | Yes | No | No | Yes | Yes | No | No | Yes | No | 4 | |
| 28 | RT | 5 | No | No | Yes | No | No | Yes | Yes | No | No | No | 3 | 5.22 |

| # | Source | | | | | | | | | | | | Score |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 29 | China | 5 | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No | No | No | No | **4** |
| 30 | BBC English/Arabic | 5 | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No | No | **5** |
| 31 | AFP | 5 | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | **6** |
| 32 | France24 | 5 | No | Yes | No | No | No | Yes | No | No | yes | No | **3** |
| 33 | WSJ | 5 | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | yes | No | **8** |
| 34 | Independent | 5 | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | **10** |
| 35 | Crickey (Australia) | 5 | Yes | No | Yes | No | No | Yes | No | No | No | No | **3** |
| 36 | Reuters | 5 | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | No | Yes | No | No | Yes | No | **5** |
| | Total Score | | | | | | | | | | | | **3.8** |

| Media Type |
|---|
| 1 = Local pro-government media |
| 2 = Local pro-opposition media |
| 3 = Other local media |
| 4 = Regional media |
| 5 = International media |

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