



The Syrian Media Response to the Disaster

An exploratory research paper exploring the realities of Syrian Alternative Media Institutions and journalists after the 6 February Turkey–Syria Earthquake.



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Introduction:

The Syrian Alternative Media Institutions and journalists have been working under special circumstances and persistent challenges. The alternative media sector emerged during the Syrian Uprising. During the setup phase, it faced all obstacles and challenges related to the lives of the Syrians under the Regime's violence and repression, and later, facing the violence resulting from the war in Syria, as well as migration and displacement, and the involvement of different international and regional parties in the conflict. All these difficulties and challenges over the past twelve years helped accumulate various capabilities and experiences in media work, coverage, and response.

The earthquake was a natural disaster in an abnormal context, where its severity and effects were compounded by various factors surrounding the Syrians and their cause. Thus, covering this disaster has been very complicated, primarily because journalists themselves became victims of the earthquake. While the main headquarters of the media institutions in northwest Syria and southern Turkey were affected by the disaster, it was necessary to provide media coverage and inform people about what happened. Therefore, our understanding of the impacts and dimensions of the disaster on media is based on the discussion of how journalists and media institutions lived the earthquake and covered its news.

This exploratory paper came to better understand the first media experience in natural disasters – the earthquake, taking into account the multiple layers of the reality of the Syrian Alternative Media pre-disaster, the challenges and threats, both at the organisational and individual levels, in particular, the challenges faced by women journalists, as well as the impacts on media coverage itself.

Methodology

This paper used exploratory research method¹ because it allows for a contextual preliminary analysis of the issues but does not start with deep identification. Rather, the issue itself builds up into the process of the research, whereas these issues are fairly new or not previously studied. This methodology does not produce fixed results; however, it expands our understanding of the issue and hypothesis and approximates research results to allow for subsequent deeper analytical and critical research.

Accordingly, the paper production stages were based on five points:

- The results of the work of the Protection Programme and the Gender Radar Programme within the Syrian Female Journalists Network over the past few years in identifying the challenges and difficulties facing Syrian journalists and the Syrian Alternative Media Institutions before the earthquake, which is based on a constant needs assessment, via surveys and focus group discussions (FGDs) with women journalists in 2021 and 2022.
- Focus Group Discussions conducted with women journalists and media institutions after the earthquake to understand the current situation of the media sector in terms of personal and professional damage. Then, three meetings were held with 16 journalists and a session with the management of Syrian alternative media institutions, in which four institutions took part.
- Monitoring and documenting the institutional experience of the Syrian Female Journalists Network during its response to women journalists directly affected by the earthquake. In the first week of the earthquake, the SFJN provided emergency grants for female journalists and human rights defenders. The grant supported 79 female journalists and defenders. Through this mechanism, we identified a wide range of needs and challenges expressed by women journalists and defenders in their initial applications. Thus, most of these points were included in this research and consisted of one of its main pillars.

1. Exploratory research is a methodology approach used to investigate an unidentified problem and is conducted to better understand an existing problem, but it does not provide decisive or definitive results, in which a researcher begins with a general idea and then starts narrowing it. This research is used to identify issues that may interest other researchers in the future. Tayseer, Mohammad, Exploratory Research, Arab Journal of Science & Research Publishing, (retrieved on 12/16/2023 from <https://blog.ajsrp.com/?p=7538>)

- Surveys for journalists and media institutions to monitor emerging post-disaster concerns and needs.
- Collect and coordinate the aforementioned data and identify them intersectionally as results of this exploratory research.

Notes on the quotes mentioned in this paper:

All the information contained in this research paper has been, in some form or another, taken from journalists and Media Institutions' management, with whom the Syrian Female Journalists Network communicates and cooperates through the Protection and the Gender Radar programmes before, during and after the earthquake. Quotation marks are used on certain occasions to emphasise the quotes that are referenced to them. Therefore, the SFJN does not adopt the literal phrases quoted herewith or how they were formed. It also presented some of the quotes of some journalists as received and in non-formal Arabic. The rest of the research paper, in which we use forms such as "we recommend, we see, etc." reflects the vision and analysis of the women researchers.

Keywords:

Journalists, Syrian Alternative Media Institutions, Media Work During Natural Disasters, Earthquake, Response.

Context:

The Syrian alternative media emerged as an inevitable result of the uprising, forming a necessity and a need to narrate and cover the people's demands after the prolonged suppression of the freedom of media and expression. This made Syrians, who were already victims of the regime and later victims of the parties involved in the conflict, as news producers. This media transformation faced numerous security and political obstacles and threats within the Syrian context. The media sector and its personnel have been systematically targeted over the past years until today.

Despite the significant developments in this sector, including institutions, media initiatives, and individuals, it has been confined or perceived through the binary of action/reaction or characterised as alternative/emerging, although its institutions have now surpassed 11 years. Nevertheless, this media sector has engaged with the complex Syrian reality, crafting an independent narrative that seeks media professionalism and ethical standards rooted in on-the-ground news reporting and aspires to have a space on the regional and international radar.

While this paper attempts to understand and explore the impact of experiencing and covering the earthquake on February 6, 2023, on the Syrian alternative media sector, it proceeds from our awareness that this sector fundamentally faces a set of challenges and difficulties at both institutional and individual levels. Therefore, it was necessary to quickly overview the most significant of these challenges before delving into the new complexities post-disaster, a set of challenges expressed by media institutions and journalists through discussion sessions or needs assessments conducted by the Syrian Female Journalist Network consecutively.

Examples of these challenges include but are not limited to,

Institutional Challenges:

Syrian alternative media institutions primarily face two types of challenges. The first is related to **their structure and overall status**, summarising issues related to funding and sustainability. This encompasses questions that concern the entire sector, including the institutions and their staff: how can Syrian media platforms and institutions continue to operate? This extends to questions about journalism as a source of income for those working there, leading to the depletion of human resources in media institutions. It also raises specific issues related to the employment of women journalists from northern Syria and Turkey, who are consistently subjected to double targeting as **"They are governed by social norms in the region that dictate guardianship of women, confining them within the private sphere, namely the family and reproductive roles."**

The second set of challenges is related to **the environment in which these institutions operate**. Institutions in **northern Syria**, in general, face challenges, with some stating that they are facing issues related to **"Security threats, the unstable situation, and a constant state of military and political emergency."** This contributes to the lack of stability for workers over a long period in the sector. Additionally, there is **"institutional instability"** due to limited financial income and the difficulty and risks of journalistic work in the region, where **"journalists, both men and women, are targeted and threatened."**

This is in addition to difficulties in developing **"comprehensive emergency plans due to the changing security situation"** and the faltered implementation of security plans provided by international institutions concerned with the protection and safety of journalists, as they are often deemed **"non-contextual"**, according to the media institutions.

As a result, institutions rely on personal experiences in the context and social relationships to address the security problems facing their staff.

As for **the challenges faced by institutions based in Turkey**, most institutions stated that they are primarily related to the complexities of **"registering media institutions in Turkey and the Turkish government's requirements that hinder freedom of work and employment."** Compliance with the government requirements forces the selection of individuals based on their legal status rather than their experience and competence.

Additionally, institutions in Turkey also suffer from **"limited funding"** and the necessity to balance between the requirements of donors and the requirements of the Turkish government. This makes some institutions constrained and limited in implementing certain commitments at the expense of their vision and goals.

On the Individual Level (Media Workers):

Challenges faced by journalists have been and continue to be monitored within the Protection Programme of the Syrian Female Journalists Network through direct communication with women journalists using a **case management mechanism** and the continuous assessments by the programme based on surveys and focus group discussions on **protection-related topics, challenges, and risks facing women journalists in both northern Syria and Turkey.**

Among the most notable challenges is the "**lack of good financial incomes for independent journalists.**" Additionally, **no law protects journalists in general**, exposing them to "**investigations, security constraints,**" or "**security accountability and lawsuits against them.**" or "**summons when addressing certain topics such as arts and music, which are considered provocative**", and this could lead to arrests. Furthermore, journalists mentioned the increasing fear of exposure to online violence, in addition to the psychological pressures related to working in journalism, as well as the ongoing violence and violations against women.

Many journalists stated that they need **work permits for journalistic work and photography** and cannot work without a press card. However, obtaining an acceptable press card from the relevant local authorities and armed groups in northeast and northwest Syria and Turkey is challenging. Working without a press card exposes them to additional risks.

Finally, some obstacles and challenges that media institutions face also negatively affect journalists, such as funding, difficulty obtaining work permits, and security threats. This leaves us with "**the lack of job security**" to varying degrees or even what some journalists described while discussing challenges facing them as "**corruption in some media institutions, such as manipulating salaries and paying lower salaries than declared to the donors.**"

Women journalists face unique challenges that their men counterparts do not experience or experience to a lesser extent. These include societal non-acceptance of women working in journalism, considering them **"outsiders/ not suitable to the profession"**, which requires significant efforts for women to secure job opportunities in the sector. These struggles do not end even after securing a job, as women continue to be pressured to "prove their worth in their roles" due to constant doubts about their abilities and competence within their institutions.

Dismissing women from work is considered easier than dismissing men for reasons attributed by women journalists to the perception that men **"are more competent and capable of journalistic work."** Additionally, **"considering men are financially responsible for their family while women do not have such responsibilities."** Some women journalists also mentioned that **"the religious and ideological orientations of Syrian media institutions"** may play a role in excluding some women journalists based on their dress or ideological orientation. **"For example, some institutions do not hire veiled women and vice versa."** This is in addition to restricting them to certain topics, such as women's issues, and not allowing them to write on political topics, for example.

Women journalists are subjected to greater bullying and violence in various forms, whether during fieldwork, within media institutions, or in cyberspace. In addition, they face increased security threats that may lead to their arrest due to their journalistic activities or those related to **"promoting feminist thought"** when working in northwest Syria, which puts them at security risk on many occasions.

In the end, women journalists suffer additional risks related to mental health due to the multiple pressures they face, including those related to journalistic work and covering traumatic topics or stories that cause psychological stress due to discrimination and the ongoing violence they experience.

All these challenges, complications, and difficulties highlighted by those working in the media sector at the institutional and individual levels were

present and tangible before the earthquake disaster.

Unfortunately, the post-disaster period had additional impacts on the lives of journalists as direct victims of the earthquake and on the media sector and institutions, both on the humanitarian and journalistic work levels. We will explore these in the results section of this paper.

Results of Monitoring and Analysis of Post-Earthquake Media Reality

This section explores the challenges and difficulties at the institutional and journalistic levels, highlighting the specific challenges women journalists face.

1. Personal and Professional Aspects of Damage and Response of the Syrian Alternative Media Institutions and Journalists

1.1 Earthquake's Direct and Indirect Damage on Journalists and Syrian Alternative Media Institutions:

The disaster has occurred! The earthquake on February 6, 2023, affected large areas of cities and towns where Syrians reside. The earthquake also impacted wide areas in Syria, particularly the provinces of Aleppo and Idlib and the Turkish provinces of Hatay, Gaziantep, Kahramanmaraş, Adana, and Urfa in southern Turkey. No one was outside the circle of direct or indirect damages. Like all earthquake victims, the media sector and its workers suffered various damages.

Everyone suffered damage at various levels and shapes. **The first damage was the loss of human life**, whether for journalists themselves or their families and loved ones, and the physical injuries due to the devastating disaster.

Many residents of earthquake-affected areas were forced to move to safer places, temporarily or permanently. However, finding a safe place “was not an easy option”. It was constrained by the conditions and complexities of movement imposed on Syrians in Turkey, which remained in place even during the disaster. Journalists in Syria faced similar difficulties in movement due to the security situation and the **"costliness of transportation,"** creating a state of confusion, panic, and continuous fear of aftershocks, causing psychological and emotional damage to everyone.

The second aspect of damages affected the Syrian Alternative Media Institutions located in earthquake-affected areas, leading to physical damages. Some lost their workplaces permanently, **most institutions lost all or some of their equipment**, and some workplaces became temporary residences for teams based on temporary safety standards. Some institutions faced **"equipment theft"** due to the chaos after the disaster.

The third damage aspect affected journalists professionally, including **the loss of equipment, instability, psychological shock**, and attempts to survive, given the movement difficulties. Additionally, **"power outages during the disaster"** made media coverage extremely challenging.

Addressing the damages and challenges specific to women journalists, some mentioned losing their ability to work as a result of the disaster, **"especially since it played a role in recalling painful memories from the past 12 years."** There was also an increase in protection risks related to **"harassment and violence against women journalists."**

Furthermore, they faced violence during their work, as they were prevented from photographing and were kept away from coverage areas.

The fourth aspect of damages involved indirect psychological and emotional impacts affecting journalists and staff of the Syrian media institutions outside the earthquake-affected areas. The psychological impact resulting from the disaster affected aspects of the journalistic work itself, solidarity, networking, and professional burnout. The magnitude of the disaster left severe psychological effects on them, in addition to **"feelings of guilt and helplessness"** and the compounded responsibility of continuing work, as they were not direct victims.

"The second phase began from the first day but crystalised on the second day, which is the embarrassment of communicating with journalists on the ground and requesting them to cover news or even requesting amendments to the materials we received from them."

1.2 Journalistic Work on the Ground Immediately After the Earthquake.

Despite all the damages we previously discussed, and despite the wide-ranging impact and scope of the disaster, which paralysed movement in the affected areas, the difficulty of obtaining real-time information related to the earthquake made **media institutions and their employees, as well as independent journalists, realise the urgent need for real-time media coverage.**

The disaster, both on a personal and professional level, was accompanied by rapid attempts to picking-up-of-the-pieces, producing news stories and rapid news, and informing the public of available services, utilising all available means of communication, sometimes experimenting with them for the first time on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok). While media work during these moments became extremely complex, the experience of observing the disaster and living through it became intertwined as a single process during this period, and it became challenging to separate everything that happened personally from the professional coverage.

"The editor-in-chief and I agreed that I would cover how people live through the earthquake disaster, i.e., how Syrians reopened their shops... But everything we agreed to report on went away once I arrived to report their stories; I really couldn't do it."

Discussing the people's situations at that moment involved two parallel paths of journalistic work: the first being a service-oriented news coverage for the people on the ground, and the second being a contextual news coverage—especially when speaking with non-Syrian media institutions—to explain the depth of the disaster on the ground. Despite the necessity of this context, it sometimes appeared that these coverages, attempting to explain the specificity of the Syrian situation, were **"not required or favoured."** This brings to mind all the challenges and difficulties Syrian journalists have faced over many years while covering the Syrian reality.

"Since we didn't have equipment and rescue workers to assist during the disaster, members of the armed factions were helping the White Helmets. So, when I wanted to film, they would say, 'Don't film the military people.' Because they were there, they prevented us from filming while I was supposed to cover the rescue process."

1.3 An Overview of the Responses of the Syrian Alternative Media Institutions to the Damage Caused by the Earthquake Disaster

Discussing the response to the disaster at the institutional level internally is, in a way, a discussion about the existence of any guide or emergency plan for journalistic work that should include natural disasters. This emergency or contingency plan essentially addresses intersections and collaborations between private and public institutions within a larger plan at the state level; thus, the difference can be seen between institutions operating in Turkey and those in northern Syria, where the complex and unstable Syrian context did not allow for any clear consecutive steps towards an effective response on a broader level.

Drawing on their experience from years of risk-laden and challenging media coverage, Syrian Alternative Media Institutions faced a new level of complexity with the earthquake disaster. While the practical assessment of damages required time, institutions worked on an **"instant and improvisational"** basis on two parallel levels: first, responding to their staff, and second, media work and coverage. We will focus here on the direct response to the team and staff, while coverage will be detailed separately later.

The administrations and management of these institutions, whether located in the earthquake-affected areas or outside—as we learned from our conversations with them and their employees—focused on caring for the team and assumed a wide range of responsibilities, including on-site coordination and the continuation of media work. Some administrations in these institutions reached the **"burnout point due to continuous work without a break."**

The responses to the staff were divided into stages that corresponded practically to the general post-disaster situation. In the early moments, institutions **directly supported their teams in reaching safer places and**

continuously checked the team's well-being. Of course, the most difficult and sensitive cases were for institutions that lost team members due to the earthquake.

"As soon as the earthquake happened, everyone ended up somewhere — some people in their cars, and others in shelters. In such a situation, as the head of an institution, you can't help but ensure that they are okay."

This was accompanied by the institutions' attempts to **provide financial support to their teams** by **"compensating individuals from the private resources of the institutions," "by providing emergency grants to individuals,"** or even by **"expediting the payment of salaries and financial dues,"** in addition to dealing with developments in a solidarity manner, such as the **"cash crisis"** that appeared in Gaziantep days after the disaster and the ways institutions secured cash for their teams.

Most institutions discussed offering **counselling and psychological support** to their teams through **"collaboration with entities that provide such services"** or **"contracting directly with specialists."**

1.4 Journalists' Perspective on the Earthquake Response

As the days passed after the earthquake disaster, disparities emerged between independent journalists and those working in media institutions. The support provided by institutions to their teams, including consideration and understanding of the conditions of their employees, ranged from **"no pressure on them"** to work, the continuation of their salaries, as well as moral support and **"continuous check on them,"** which made employees feel relatively financially secure. Some justified the relatively small support at times by stating that the event was bigger than the media institutions' capacity to respond, as they were also affected. **However, this form of support was not available for independent journalists.**

Amidst all that happened, independent journalists were forced to seek support from institutions and supporting bodies for journalists. Most responses were **"weak, especially financially."** In addition, there were difficulties and complexities in grant applications that required **"a lot of writing and formulation."** This was accompanied by the scarcity of these grants in the first place.

1.5 Regional and International Support and Solidarity for Media Institutions and Journalists

Immediately after the disaster, Syrian Alternative Media Institutions turned to international and global organisations supporting media and freedom of expression, seeking regional and international solidarity and support at the sector level. However, it became evident that this support was **weak and sometimes conditional, often associated with the direct danger related to or caused by journalistic work. Apologies were issued for not supporting journalists on the ground, citing "the earthquake and its effects is a natural disaster unrelated to journalistic work."** Some institutions sought assistance from other Syrian organisations to obtain **small grants for individuals as an emergency solution** due to the challenging situation of international support for the Syrian media sector. Additionally, some Syrian institutions mentioned that **the previously scheduled "funding cuts" were activated**, and the disaster was not considered.

On the other hand, the global feminist solidarity we experienced as the Syrian Female Journalists Network was relatively better. It provided reasonable financial, moral, and psychological support despite the **"general disappointment in support, advocacy, and media coverage of the disaster and its outcomes."**

2. Media Coverage of the Earthquake by Journalists and the Syrian Alternative Media Institutions:

2.1 The Concept of Media Coverage During Disaster.

"Floods, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tsunami waves are not just geological phenomena but events that also reveal the social, economic, and political mismanagement in the affected communities.²"

This is what the Global Investigative Journalism Network concluded in its discussion of the Ninth Global Investigative Journalism Conference in 2015. This statement can be broadly applied in the Syrian context after the earthquake disaster, as any coverage of the reality in the affected areas carries a multifaceted narrative about the complex situation. Therefore, it becomes a political discourse delineating the problematic points the Syrian alternative media perceived.

"In the heart of the earthquake, Syria is a highly politicised country, and all forms of response have been politicised. It means that as a team, we had to speak about and address political realities; in that moment, that was not a political moment."

"After the earthquake, if I want to talk about the areas controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham,³ in these areas, no one can carry a camera... or take pictures unless they have a permit from the Development Office of Tahrir al-Sham's government [the Salvation government]."

The plans for media coverage primarily stemmed from the experiences of institutions and journalists in dealing with war and its aftermath. Despite the significant changes we have outlined regarding the difference between the earthquake disaster and previous experiences, **the absence of a guide for media coverage during natural disasters made improvisation and a "day-to-day" plan an initial solution for most institutions.**

2. Goswami, Parul, **How To Investigate Disasters**, Global Investigative Journalism Conference Magazine. (Retrieved on 14/10/2015. Link: <https://shorturl.at/agkqw>)

3. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) controls around half of Idlib province (northwest Syria) and limited parts of the adjacent provinces of Aleppo, Hama, Latakia.

These plans focused on news, services and awareness, and some institutions expanded on these aspects, such as health news or basic reporting. They also utilised experts to provide real-time monitoring or opened up the space for sharing people's stories and news. These plans took some time to stabilise, and most institutions indicated that it took them 20 to 30 days to partially return to their usual programmes. Before that, they had changed the structure of their journalistic and media work to varying degrees to align with their priorities.

The shortage in human resources and the number of journalists was a key factor in guiding the coverage of these institutions. They had **to strike a balance between the ability to provide extensive coverage of the affected areas and the number of people capable of covering it**. This was especially challenging with suspending work for some radio stations, even for a short period, or reducing the number of live news bulletins. Institutions turned to social media as a quick alternative and **increased the working hours of some of these institutions' staff**.

This emergency situation **radically changed** how some institutions communicate with journalists, report news or respond. This led to different opinions among some journalists, as some believed that the disaster increased the lack of coordination between media institutions and journalists, while others thought that the disaster led to better coordination and created mutual solidarity in responding to the earthquake.

2.2 Coverage Collaboration. Regional and International Coverage.

The first and most important collaborative aspects emerged through what some Syrian media institutions described as receiving many **volunteering applications to cover the disaster** in various fields, such as news reporting, writing articles and editorial work. This reflected the interest of journalists outside these institutions in helping convey the Syrian voice or presenting the Syrian perspective on the ongoing events.

As mentioned earlier, the institutions' personnel shortage during the disaster led them to "**contract with journalists from outside their teams.**" Most of these contracts were with individuals outside the affected areas, working on various aspects of journalistic coverage, whether on social media or digital platforms.

The second evident point of collaboration during the disaster was some institutions **opening their offices and headquarters on the ground to various groups of reporters, beyond their staff, to report their news.** Meanwhile, other institutions **opened their photo and video libraries for journalistic use.** Additionally, some Syrian institutions **leveraged their regional coordination and partnerships** to expand the coverage impact from local to regional, republishing news citing them.

It is worth mentioning that some initiatives were launched by Syrian journalists to provide news, photos, and videos to the Arab and international media. Examples include the **Frontlineinfocus**⁴ agency launched by Hadeel Arja and Khalil Ashawi, offering exclusive media services and coverage of the earthquake for media and non-governmental organisations unable to send their correspondents to Syria. Another initiative is the **Networking Initiative**,⁵ which connected any non-Syrian journalist interested in covering the disaster with Syrian journalists conducting field coverage. This initiative was launched by the journalist and trainer Mais Katt on her Facebook page.

While regional official media (government-owned or state-owned media) cannot be relied upon for coverage of news in northwest Syria and southern

4. Link: <https://frontlineinfocusxr.net/>

5. Qandil, Asma, [Journalists share their experiences, advice for covering the Turkey-Syria earthquake](https://shorturl.at/klyO6), International Journalists Network. (Retrieved on 10/02/2023 <https://shorturl.at/klyO6>)

Turkey, it was apparent that even by regional alternative media institutions, **"unfortunately, there was a scarcity of coverage from alternative media institutions in the region, at least in the early days of the earthquake."**

Unlike Syrian journalists, foreign journalists could enter the affected areas smoothly and provide reports and coverage within a relatively safe environment. Most of them were correspondents for large media institutions.

"I am talking about providing a safe environment for Syrian journalists inside Syria, similar to what is provided to foreign journalists."

2.3 The Status of Professional and Ethical Standards While Covering During Disasters.

Based on the challenges discussed earlier, instantaneous solutions in media coverage have transformed into individual solutions. This means that each institution has reformulated its professional and ethical standards according to the present moment. Some institutions indicated turning to their donors or international entities seeking support regarding **"emergency plans and safety measures."** However, most available material on these topics relates to natural disasters in other contexts, requiring Syrian institutions to reframe and adapt these plans for use in the Syrian context. Some institutions also requested **"direct assistance from other teams or their donors,"** engaging in discussions about safety standards. A few institutions mentioned using their existing **"code of conduct,"** which they had applied for many years.

As for the journalists themselves, professional differences emerged during coverage, with some journalists feeling **"untrained in conducting interviews in the context of natural disasters."** According to their perspective, some media materials were considered **"completely inappropriate and violated journalistic standards."** Some women journalists pointed out that the wavering of these standards made **journalists themselves victims in the event "as scoops" at times.**

Other women journalists highlighted that their years of experience reporting on war, conflict, and displacement have equipped them with **"tools to handle the earthquake disaster with high sensitivity."** This experience incentivised them to report the news from their perspective **as earthquake victims and journalists.** Some media institutions also emphasised the relevance of **their experience in reporting and covering the war.**

It's worth mentioning that some women journalists in northern Syria mentioned that ethical standards were used as a pretext and a tool to exclude them from direct coverage by armed factions.

Some journalists were prevented from filming specific areas for reasons related to these factions, while the factions argued that their reasons were to respect the privacy of the victims.

2.4 Current Situation and Coverage⁶

Media institutions and journalists provided **real-time and service-oriented news coverage** from the first moment after the earthquake. Everyone continued to progress in their coverage until most institutions returned, to varying degrees, to their usual forms of work. In-depth reports, investigative journalism, and analytical programmes were resumed. Many institutions expressed that earthquake coverage would continue, albeit in different forms. For example, focus on the **international aspect of the disaster's impact**, the aftermath on the ground, the work of the organisations currently, or the **long-term efforts of civil society** and aid delivery to the affected individuals. Some coverage would also concentrate on **tracking cases of exploitation and violence on the ground**.

Journalists affirmed that the coverage would persist for them, as the earthquake and its aftermath were integral to **their current reality**. Many stories still "**need discussion and investigation, such as the conditions of people after the earthquake and the stories of rebuilding homes and neighbourhoods,**" especially given the complexities in the affected areas.

6. The Current Situation - here refers to the period of writing this paper in May-June 2023.

3. Support Needs for Media Institutions and Journalists to Overcome the Impact of the Earthquake and Continue Operating:

Several needs have been identified through interviews with the management of media institutions. Foremost among them is the need for **"additional financial support."** The administrations cited the fundamental problem of a decline in international support for Syrian media institutions as a crucial issue, especially given that their **"need for liquidity is now more than ever."** This is to compensate for the damages resulting from the earthquake to the institutions' premises and equipment, whether in the restoration and repair of these premises or the **"construction of new headquarters alternative for those completely demolished."**

In addition to this, there is a necessity for supporting these institutions in developing **emergency plans and safety policies that include natural disasters.** Providing appropriate training and guidelines for the Syrian media work context is crucial.

In a related context, institutions emphasised: **"the necessity for international donors to share responsibility in finding more flexible solutions regarding financial transfers and delivering financial support to northern Syria."**

As for the needs of journalists, the focus is also on **"the need for financial support, especially considering that they have lost all basic living conditions, and most of them have been forced to relocate once again."** This includes **"the need to compensate for the lost work equipment"** and **provide training for professional development in the media context, including emergency response and necessary media standards.** Journalists emphasised that the need has become urgent after the disaster, more than ever, **"to build their capacity to get employment opportunities."**

There was a lack of mental health services during the disaster based on a preconceived notion that it was not a priority for the victims. However, all the journalists and institutions we contacted confirmed that they **desperately needed these services and could not access them easily and comfortably**. They also emphasised that such services should be **"available long-term."** Therefore, we recommend that these services be provided in various collective and individual forms and not be limited to a short time frame, as was the case with some temporary psychological services provided by some entities only after the earthquake. Additionally, there should be a serious consideration of **the risk of burnout** as a priority by regional and international donors.

Furthermore, there is a need for donors and institutions **to provide legal support and advocate for the rights of journalists in Turkey and Syria**. This includes issuing press cards and facilitating freedom of movement and freedom of the media.

International support for Syrian journalists is crucial, either directly or through supporting Syrian institutions concerned with journalists' support and freedom of expression. This should encompass various forms of necessary support in the current situation to overcome the crisis and continue the journalistic work, including **funding new media projects and initiatives**. There is also a need to reconsider the procedures and criteria of international institutions for providing grants to journalists, often not applicable to the Syrian context or the threats faced by Syrian journalists, **which was highlighted significantly during the earthquake disaster**.

Conclusion:

This exploratory research paper was based on our knowledge and experience of the reality of the Syrian alternative media sector. Therefore, the coverage of the disaster carried out by institutions and journalists was a unique experience from multiple perspectives, from the damages they faced to their ability to deliver the news and even investigate the aftermath on many occasions.

In appreciation of this immersive experience, fraught with violence against Syrians, opening a new chapter in their ongoing tragedy and widening an existing gap in the ability of affected areas to survive and persist, providing Syrian media with a different perspective, this paper accompanied media workers step by step to shed light on the details and experiences of this ordeal.

During our discussions and responses to the disaster, we found that understanding the various challenges facing this sector must be based on fleshing out the reality on the ground before the disaster. Therefore, we began by collecting and summarising information about the challenges and risks facing Syrian journalists and the Syrian Alternative Media Institutions before the earthquake. Then, we addressed the new layer of challenges caused by the earthquake and how it sometimes hearkened back to a long path of personal and professional loss for everyone.

The recommendations outlined in this research paper stem from two primary sources. Firstly, they are based on the explicit demands and needs voiced by the institutions and journalists we engaged with. Secondly, they draw from the experiences of the Syrian Female Journalists Network, a feminist media foundation dedicated to supporting and advancing the Syrian alternative media sector.

Furthermore, as a foundation directly affected by the earthquake, our team remained deeply connected to the disaster's context while communicating

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Syrian Female Journalists Network