

Syria: Developing Computer Skills Takes Top Priority

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New courses offer crucial ways of communicating with the outside world.

Abdalla works at a radio station in Kfar Nabel named Radio Fresh. The 30 year-old covers events in Syria's liberated areas, and is keen to have his voice heard by the outside world.

"Learning good computer and internet skills became my top priority," said Abdalla.

At a training course at the **Royah Centre for Community Development** he was taught how to produce TV and radio reports and send them to various news agencies via the internet.

"Before the revolution, the internet was closely monitored by the government and people couldn't make much use of it," he said. "Now, however, both computer and internet skills have become essential."

The high demand for these skills led 27 year-old accountant and computer expert Alaa to approach the Royah centre in Kfar Nabel.

Alaa offered to teach courses at the centre along with its director Yasir, an English language teacher and computer programmer.

Together they designed a number of training courses, and now teach classes of up to 50 students. Each training course runs for three months and is held two days a week.

"The whole idea only required a few computers and some relevant books. We easily managed to acquire both and we now run a variety of courses," Alaa said.

"We teach computer skills such as Office - Word, Excel and PowerPoint - and using the internet, email and search engines. We run social media courses, where we teach students how to set up accounts such as Twitter, Facebook, blogs and YouTube," he continued.

"We teach students interested in developing media skills how to edit videos, the principles of photography and Photoshop, and the principles of producing radio and TV reports.

"And we also run advanced training courses on digital protection and encryption, and the risks of having a computer or account hacked."

Alaa believes that all these courses are essential to allow people in liberated areas to communicate with the outside world.

He told Damascus Bureau that the Royah centre currently receives no financial aid and relies on the modest support of local organisations such as the **Sadad Association**, which provided them with a venue and equipment.

Women's training centres in Kfar Nabel have also been focusing on developing internet and computer skills.

The Mazaya Women's Centre in Kfar Nabel offers such training to both its staff and external applicants.

"The training courses we run are very beneficial to our employees," said Abeer, who works as computer trainer at the centre.

"Staff learn how to create spreadsheets, organise files, compile reports and use the internet to download useful material."

Like many other aspects of life, delivering training in opposition-held areas is riddled with hardship.

"The most serious difficulty my college faced was the bombing," said Ahmad, a 27-year-old from Maraat al-Numan who has been studying at the Shine Institute.

This college has been bombed twice; once following its launch in November 2015, and again a month later.

Shine offers a wide variety of courses including basic computer programming, digital sciences, computer maintenance, computer networks, mathematics, economy, project management and Arabic and English language.

Courses run for nine months, after which students are awarded an internationally recognised professional certificate.

“There is amazing talent when it comes to internet and computer skills in liberated areas, and many computer-literate people volunteer to teach these courses for free,” Ahmad said.

But he added that he believes that fear of another attack on the institute has discouraged many students from enrolling.

Maha al-Ahmad is the pseudonym of a Damascus Bureau contributor from Kfar Nabel, Syria.

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