

Syria: May'08

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Important milestone for Syria programme as young journalists attend IWPR's first training session in the country.

Demand for IWPR's first journalism seminar in Syria was such that the organisers expanded the number of participants on the course, which ran between May 17-25 at the Syrian Academy for Training and Development, SIA, in Damascus.

Seventeen young Syrian journalists – about seven more than originally envisaged – took part in the training session. They were introduced to international standards of news and feature writing; and debated the role of journalists in society, ethical standards, accountability and media neutrality.

But the main focus of the class was hands-on training in writing news and features stories, conducting interviews and sourcing information.

The Damascus training workshop was organised in conjunction with the SIA at their offices in the West Damascus neighbourhood of Mazzeh.

SIA features state-of-the art classrooms with wireless internet, modern presentation technology, a TV and radio studio, computer lab and several meeting halls. Dr Nezar Meyhoob, director of the private media academy and a former ministry of information employee, said he hopes IWPR will conduct more training courses in Syria to help improve journalism standards in Syria.

Many of the participants already hold degrees in journalism from Syrian universities; others studied economics or international law.

However, all of them said they learned a great deal about journalism practice.

"I realised that we journalists must put much more effort into reporting in an unbiased, objective way," said one participant after the session. "I learned more in these eight days than I learned during my studies at university where they teach us a lot of theory but very little practice."

"There have been many changes in the Syrian media in the past two or three years. New private media outlets were established, but so far most of them adhere to the old traditional style of reporting," said another. "We Syrian journalists can benefit a lot from such trainings with experts from abroad to become more professional. It will also help us to write for a more international audience, not just our local readers."

The participants – eight men and nine women from a number of cities, including Damascus, Aleppo, Lattakiya, Qamishli and Tartus – mainly work for private media outlets in Syria, like newly established websites, Satellite TV channels as well as new monthly magazines. They have also previously worked for government-backed media.

In the course of the training session, each student researched and wrote a feature story on a topic of his or her choice that was then discussed in class.

The topics the students suggested ranged from how economic hardships affect Syrian youths' marriage options, an art boom in Damascus galleries, healthcare problems to recent government attempts at economic reform. Some of these pieces will be published on the IWPR website within the next weeks.

Susanne Fischer managed IWPR's Iraq programme over the last three years. The workshop in Damascus was her first activity in her new role as IWPR Syria Country Director.

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