

Syrian Journalists Wary of Rebel Factions

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Islamic State may have the most murderous approach to free expression, but other paramilitary groups aren't very keen on it, either.

When Islamic State militants stormed the premises of Radio Fresh in Kfar Nabel in early 2014, seizing equipment and arresting employees, Salah al-Abed thought he was going to be killed.

He was painfully aware that his work as a reporter put him at great personal risk. Patting himself down with trembling hands, he made sure his ID card was safely in his pocket. He guessed this would be the only way of identifying his body if he was beheaded.

Abed's fears were well-grounded. Most reporters in rebel-held Syria, whether independent or working for local or international media, face numerous difficulties that hamper them in doing their jobs properly.

The head of Radio Fresh, Rami al-Fares, explained the challenges of reporting on Islamic rebel factions, which impose many restrictions on journalists in the areas they control.

"When they manage to liberate a certain area or wage a successful battle somewhere, there are no restrictions about covering that," he said. "But when those same factions arrest someone, carry out raids on civilian homes or impose new rules, we are very careful about covering those stories for fear of a negative reaction from them."

The Islamic State militants raided Radio Fresh and confiscated its equipment under the pretext that the station was "spreading blasphemy". On that occasion, the employees who were arrested were released in a matter of hours, but more trouble was to come with the arrival of another rebel group, Jabhat al-Nusra.

Jabhat al-Nusra seized control of most of southern Idlib province in December 2014, following prolonged battles with the Syria Revolutionaries Front (Jabhat Thowar Suriyya), a coalition formed by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in Jabal al-Zawiya.

Radio Fresh was raided again, this time by Jabhat al-Nusra militants who accused them of printing a newspaper called Souriyatuna (Our Syria), which had expressed solidarity with the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo after the January 7 attack on its offices. The allegation turned out to be false - Souriyatouna was in fact published in Turkey and distributed in Syria.

It is not just the Islamic factions that mistreat journalists. The FSA and other rebel groups are also intolerant of criticism.

Abada al-Ansar is a correspondent for the Al-Quds al-Arabi newspaper who works in a part of Idlib province that is under opposition control.

"When you want to cover a story in an area controlled by one of the FSA factions, you have to get permission from the commanding officer before being able to carry out any interview," he said. "More often than not, if what you're covering is a military loss they have sustained, or arrests they have made, your request is met with total refusal. And if you try to bypass permission, you risk either arrest or 'tatbin' [detention by being held in the boot of a car]."

"They want us to operate by their rules," Ansari continued, "which means bending our journalistic principles to the rise and fall of every new faction, and always being indirectly tied to them."

Reporter Ahmad Kanjo, agreed, noting that "we run into a lot of difficulties, mainly when trying to get military information and especially when our position [as journalists] isn't aligned with that of the armed factions".

Other reporters say that while they do not feel particularly threatened by any of the rebels, they are acutely aware that the job inevitably carries risks.

"All the ruling factions in Idlib province are quite cooperative with us, whether that's the Islamic factions or the FSA," said Mohammad al-Faysal, a correspondent with the Orient satellite channel in Idlib province. "Despite that, however, I always have the feeling that I'm a target by virtue of the nature of my work."

Journalists also struggle to gather information about humanitarian issues and the work of NGOs operating in rebel-held areas.

"We get many rejections from civil society organisations when we're trying to get an interview with

someone, but it's always indirect," Ammar al-Mahmud, a reporter with Radio Fresh, said. "They'll usually say that they are reluctant to talk about such and such a topic, or that they're too busy with other things."

Ordinary people are similarly unwilling to talk to reporters. Many people still earn salaries as employees of the government in Damascus, and they are afraid that if they speak to a reporter, their identity will be revealed and they will lose their job. These fears are not helped by rumours that journalists seeking interviews are in fact paid informers.

"I face a lot of criticism from civilians when I ask them for interviews," Mohammad al-Bassem, a reporter with Radio Fresh, said. "Many of them accuse me of trying to make money out of them. To date, I haven't been able to arrange a single interview with anyone who's still working for the Syrian government."

Orient TV correspondent Faysal blamed the Damascus government for fostering this reluctance to talk to reporters.

"For 40 years, the regime imposed a media blackout and marginalised the media, which is why civilians don't understand the importance of the media's role in reporting on their situation and their sufferings," he said. "That's why most of the time they'll tell you, 'Well, what's the use of what you're doing?'"

Another problem is that most reporters in rebel-held areas have no professional training. They are not journalism or media graduates, but come instead from other disciplines like literature, history and philosophy. Some have had no college education, and at best have only attended short training workshops.

Ansari, the Al-Quds al-Arabi correspondent, acknowledges that he has little relevant training.

"I'm not a journalist by profession," he said. "I graduated in agricultural engineering, and I entered journalism to try to spread the message of the revolution to the world. Everything I know about journalism and the media comes from a short training course I went on in Turkey."

Media outlets to work for are thin on the ground. Some magazines like Al-Mantara, published in Kfar Nabel, lack financial backing, so they stop publishing for months at a time because they cannot afford the printing costs. Some local activists have attempted to launch their own magazines, for instance one called Sawa in Kansafra, a town in the Jabal al-Zawiya area. However, the publication had to close after only a few months due to lack of funding.

Abed from Radio Fresh no longer fears Islamic State since its forces were ousted from the area. But that threat has been replaced by worries about the other Islamic factions that dominate the region and still prevent journalists like him from working freely.

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