



الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان
SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

The Role of Journalism in the Transitional Justice Process in Syria after Years of Repression and Intimidation

Reforming the Legal Framework and Prohibiting Hate Speech and Incitement to Violence are the First Tasks of the New Syrian State

Thursday 30 October 2025



From March 2011 to June 2025, the Syrian Network for Human Rights documented the following:

The **killing** of

725

media workers

At least

486

media workers
forcibly disappeared



The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.

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FIRST: INTRODUCTION

After an authoritarian regime's fall or an armed conflict's end, societies face a daunting task: the rebuilding of destroyed infrastructure, as well as the torn social fabric of the country. Transitional justice provides a legal and ethical framework that enables states to confront the legacy of grave violations, paving the way for reconciliation and the restoration of frayed societal bonds.

At the heart of this delicate process, journalism plays a vital and indispensable role. It exposes hidden truths, shapes collective awareness that supports a culture of accountability, and pushes for institutional reform to ensure that atrocities are not repeated. Although studies often focus on the legal and political aspects of transitional justice, the media dimension is no less important, as it provides victims with a platform to make their silenced voices heard and creates an environment for holding perpetrators and those involved accountable.

In the Syrian context, the media has long been subject to strict censorship, turning it into a propaganda tool that justifies the regime's policies and legitimizes its violations. However, the outbreak of the popular uprising in March 2011 brought about a radical shift, with the emergence of independent journalistic initiatives and bold citizen journalism that sought to break the information monopoly and challenge the official narrative. They played a pivotal role in documenting widespread violations, including arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, systematic torture, and the targeting of civilians and infrastructure.

Independent journalists have continued to monitor violations and report the truth, despite the enormous obstacles they face, including security prosecutions and direct targeting, as well as scarce funding and a lack of specialized technical expertise.

This vision of **the Syrian Network for Human Rights** seeks to explore the multiple roles that journalism can play in the Syrian transitional justice process, focusing on its primary functions of uncovering the truth and countering the culture of denial. The report also discusses the structural challenges facing the Syrian media landscape at the legislative, institutional, and societal levels, and proposes practical solutions that enable the media to play an effective role in documenting crimes, promoting accountability, and supporting reconciliation efforts. Any transitional justice project remains contingent on the ability of journalism to document the facts, convey the voices of victims, and stimulate an effective response from society and the state to the demands of justice.

This supplementary vision is based on [the main vision for the transitional justice process issued by SNHR](#) on April 17, 2025, and on [the political vision for achieving pluralism and participation issued on March 6, 2025](#).

Fadel Abdulghany, Executive Director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, says:



For the past fourteen years, the media has been the lung of truth through which the issues of Syrian victims have breathed, and their window to the world. At every stage of the Syrian tragedy, journalists—professionals and citizens alike—have stood on the front lines, documenting with their blood what international mechanisms have sometimes failed to document.

We at the Syrian Network for Human Rights consider media work a strategic partner in the transitional justice process. Without the efforts of media professionals, thousands of violations would have been forgotten and denied. As a human rights organization, we would not have been able to achieve the level of documenting and cataloging of violations we have without a genuine partnership with the media community.



SECOND: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: MEDIA AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

The Concept of Transitional Journalism:

The term “transitional journalism” refers to the growing role played by media outlets in the aftermath of conflicts, wars, or the collapse of authoritarian regimes, as societies seek to achieve transitional justice in its various dimensions. This concept can be understood through two main dimensions:

first, the transformation of journalism in post-conflict contexts, and second, its close connection to transitional justice mechanisms as a bridge connecting the past, present, and future.

A. The transformation of journalism in post-conflict societies:

Media environments in post-conflict countries are characterized by varying degrees of fragility in their infrastructure and professional and ethical standards. Throughout history, the media in these contexts have been either complicit with or subject to the grip of power, leading to a lack of balanced coverage and the marginalization of the voices of victims and marginalized groups. As conflicts end or repressive regimes fall, the media landscape undergoes profound transformations for several reasons:

1. The sudden opening of public spaces:

With the cessation of direct violence or the dismantling of repressive apparatuses, new spaces for freedom of expression and publication are opening up, encouraging the emergence of independent media platforms that seek to provide more objective content, free from the narratives of the former regime. At this critical juncture, media institutions are working to restore public trust after decades of propaganda and coercive censorship.

2. Employing digital technologies:

With financial and human resources scarce, journalists in post-conflict environments are turning to digital tools and social media platforms to gather and verify information, taking advantage of their low cost and widespread availability. These tools also enhance the role of citizen journalism in filling news gaps, especially in areas difficult for professional journalists to access

3. Shaping a human rights discourse:

After decades of conflict or repression, there is an urgent need to expose violations, hold perpetrators accountable, and amplify the voices of victims. Transitional media emerges as a tool for uncovering hidden violence, conveying survivor testimonies, and documenting them legally and historically. In doing so, this type of media goes beyond simply reporting news to contribute to shaping a national narrative about the roots of conflict and ways to overcome it.

B. The connection between journalism and transitional justice mechanisms:

Independent journalism is a backbone of the transitional justice architecture—a point emphasized by leading theorists in the field, including Priscilla Heiner in her seminal study, «Unspoken Truths» (2010) and Martha Minow in her book, «Between Revenge and Forgiveness» (1998). A free and bold media represents a fundamental pillar upon which societies rely to achieve democratic transformation. This close relationship is manifested through four roles:

1. Highlighting the work of the Accountability, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions

Accountability, truth, and reconciliation commissions represent the most prominent mechanisms of transitional justice, as they document human rights violations with a meticulous methodology. Here, the media plays a vital role: conveying the recommendations of these commissions to the general public in understandable language and covering the hearings of victims and perpetrators. Broadcasting these testimonies breaks the wall of silence, stimulates collective memory to comprehend the magnitude of the injustices that occurred, and transforms them from isolated individual experiences into a public issue requiring a societal response.

2. Popular oversight of judicial processes:

The Syrian Network for Human Rights recommends the establishment of a special court to hold accountable perpetrators of crimes against humanity and war crimes. Here, the media emerges as the public's watchful eye on the course of justice. Press coverage allows citizens to follow trials and monitor their integrity, enhancing confidence in judicial proceedings and limiting political or military interference that could undermine them. The absence of independent media leads to a blackout of cases before the courts, impeding the achievement of justice and redress for victims.

3. Formulating a national narrative that transcends divisions:

Transitional journalism converges with the philosophy of national reconciliation at a fundamental point: building a unifying narrative that transcends the fractures created by conflict. Through dialogue platforms that bring together victims, witnesses, and experts, the media can resist attempts to deny or minimize violations. It also creates a counterbalance to inflammatory rhetoric that glorifies violence and fuels divisions, reinforcing societal conviction that acknowledging what happened is an indispensable step toward national recovery.

4. Building a collective memory that resists forgetting:

As conflicts end, a pivotal question arises: What happens to the testimonies and documents collected during the years of conflict? Here, the importance of journalism emerges in building a solid “collective memory” by systematically archiving stories, documents, and testimonies, enabling their subsequent use in judicial and historical processes, and even in educational curricula. The Syrian Network for Human Rights emphasizes that this role goes beyond simply preserving information, extending to reconstructing the human meaning of painful experiences, paving the way for national recovery.

THIRD: THE SYRIAN CASE: ANALYTICAL CONTEXT

Historical Overview: How the Media Transformed from a Tool for Propaganda to a Space for Resistance:

Since the Ba’ath Party seized power in Syria in the 1960s, the media landscape has witnessed an increasing shrinkage of freedoms until they completely disappeared. Under the umbrella of strict laws, all media outlets—from official newspapers to television stations and radio stations—have become mere mouthpieces for the Assad regime, subject to stifling security censorship. For decades, the media’s role has been limited to glorifying the president and promoting his political discourse, while any attempt to establish independent platforms has been met with immediate repression—through bans, closures, or security prosecution.

However, the outbreak of protests in March 2011 revolutionized the Syrian media landscape. Suddenly, independent media initiatives emerged, and the phenomenon of citizen journalism was born as a revolutionary alternative to conveying the truth. These initiatives exploited social media platforms—Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter—as alternative channels to convey facts, free from the grip of government censorship. These platforms succeeded in presenting a more realistic picture, documenting the early days of the popular uprising and exposing the regime’s repressive methods of dealing with demonstrators, conveying to the world truths that had been hidden for decades.

Despite violent crackdowns targeting citizen journalists and independent media professionals, this new media model continued to expand, capitalizing on the digital revolution and the ease of disseminating content online. Thus, Syria witnessed a qualitative transformation from a media space completely closed to the Assad regime to a more pluralistic landscape, albeit one beset by security threats, political pressures, and a lack of funding.

Documenting Atrocities: The Battle for Truth Amid the Fires of War

- **Dangers facing journalists inside Syria:**

The years of armed conflict in Syria have exposed the exceptional suffering of journalists, who have paid with their lives for conveying the truth. The early years of the conflict witnessed a sharp increase in systematic violations against media professionals—kidnapping, arbitrary detention, forced exile—affecting dozens of independent journalists. Field testimonies documented by the Syrian Network for Human Rights in special periodic and annual reports on violations against media professionals tell horrific stories of journalists being tortured in detention centers, or directly executed, simply on suspicion of collaborating with independent or international media outlets.

These risks were not limited to areas controlled by the Assad regime but extended to areas under the influence of various parties to the conflict, where armed factions imposed their own censorship and used violence as a weapon to control the media narrative. In this perilous environment, journalistic work has become a daily adventure, with journalists exposed to constant threats from the warring parties, who have sought to exploit the media to serve their agendas.

- **Citizen Journalism: When the Mobile Phone Becomes More Powerful Than a Weapon:**

Amid this security crackdown, citizen journalism has emerged as a vital force to fill the news vacuum and document what is happening. Volunteers and ordinary civilians—armed only with their smartphones and social media accounts—have played a pivotal role in documenting the reality on the ground, by recording live video, taking photos, and interviewing eyewitnesses and survivors. This daily documentation effort, despite its simple tools, has provided a basic database for international media outlets and human rights organizations to understand the scale of violations and the nature of the crimes committed.

But this pivotal role has come at a heavy price. Citizen journalists have become a direct target for all parties to the conflict, with many being subjected to blackmail, arrest, or physical liquidation, in an unequal confrontation between the weapons of words and images on the one hand, and the weapons of bloody repression on the other.

Shocking numbers document a war against the truth:

From March 2011 to June 2025, the Syrian Network for Human Rights documented the following:

- The killing of **725** media workers, including 7 children and 6 women (adult female), as well as 9 foreign journalists, 559 of whom were killed by Assad regime forces.
- At least **486** media workers, including 9 women (adult female), and 17 foreign journalists remain forcibly disappeared, including 392 at the hands of Assad regime forces.

Despite the multiple parties implicated in these violations, the Assad regime bears the greatest responsibility, given its systematic policy of eliminating any independent media voice. This policy involves direct targeting within areas under its control, as well as the persecution of journalists working in areas outside its influence, in an attempt to obscure the facts and silence alternative narratives that might expose its crimes.

It's worth noting that the numbers in our database are not just cold statistics, but rather a testament to the unprecedented sacrifices made by an entire sector for the sake of truth. These sacrifices were not in vain; rather, they established a collective memory that will form the cornerstone of any future transitional justice process in Syria.

Future Compass: Media in Post-Assad Syria

The end of the authoritarian era represents a pivotal historical moment, allowing Syrian society to re-establish its democratic structure based on justice and fairness. While this phase will present significant political and security challenges, the decline of the repressive grip will open a valuable window for reshaping the media landscape on new principles that enable journalism to effectively contribute to the democratic transition process. At this juncture, five pivotal roles for the media become evident:

A. National Memory Portfolio:

With the Assad regime gone, investigative journalism will have an unprecedented opportunity to complete the documentation of the violations that have taken place in Syria throughout the years of conflict. Access to previously withheld documents—detainee files, secret interrogation records, and military operational orders—will be opened up, and journalists will be able to verify the information using advanced digital forensics (OSINT) techniques.

This systematic documentation will constitute a vital national archive for fact-finding committees and criminal courts and will also consolidate a collective memory that will prevent attempts to obscure the facts or evade responsibility.

B. The watchful eye of justice:

During the rebuilding of judicial institutions, the media will serve as a public watchdog over the course of justice. By reporting details of ongoing investigations, exposing weaknesses in prosecutions, and following up on victims' cases, the press will enable society to exert sustained pressure to ensure that those involved are held accountable and that they do not escape punishment. Investigative journalism will also contribute to providing additional evidence to the judiciary, helping to uncover perpetrators and their accomplices, thereby reinforcing the principle of non-selective justice.

C. Platform for comprehensive national dialogue:

Post-Assad Syria will witness a massive influx of information and divergent opinions, potentially opening the door to misinformation and inflammatory rhetoric. This is where the role of professional media emerges in providing balanced and accurate content and countering attempts to distort the facts or exploit collective emotions.

Talk shows and independent media platforms will provide safe spaces for victims, survivors, legal experts, and civil society activists to build a unified national narrative that transcends sectarian and regional divisions. Journalism will also serve as a platform for public debate on crucial issues: drafting a new constitution, reforming security institutions, developing compensation and reparations mechanisms, and formulating policies that promote social justice and reconciliation.

D. Guardian of Emerging Democracy:

The media's role is not limited to exposing past violations; it extends to serving as a first line of defense against the return of tyranny in new forms. By continually highlighting the stories and suffering of victims, society creates a living memory that protects it against the dangers of reproducing oppressive models.

The press also plays a role in spreading awareness of human rights values and international conventions, thus strengthening the rejection of impunity and promoting a culture of accountability as a guarantee against the recurrence of atrocities. In this context, the media will play a pivotal role in combating hate speech and incitement, promoting the discourse of equal citizenship, and promoting the values of tolerance and coexistence.

E. Dismantling the discourse of denial:

Addressing the culture of denial is essential to the success of transitional justice, as continued justification or downplaying of crimes deepens the wounds of victims and hinders efforts to uncover the truth.

Since the beginning of the popular uprising, the Assad regime has consistently distorted the image of its victims by labeling them as «terrorists» or «foreign agents,» while ignoring documented violations against civilians. In countering this rhetoric, independent journalism will play a crucial role in deconstructing these narratives, exposing their contradictions, and presenting alternative accounts supported by evidence and field testimonies.

This role will become increasingly important in post-Assad Syria, where some supporters of the former regime will attempt to reproduce its justification rhetoric and whitewash its practices, which amount to crimes against humanity. This underscores the need for an independent media capable of countering disinformation campaigns and the manipulation of collective memory, as a prerequisite for the success of the transitional justice project.

FOURTH: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS: POST-AUTHORITARIAN MEDIA IN SYRIA

Syria, emerging from the yoke of tyranny, faces a complex dilemma: How to build a media landscape capable of supporting transitional justice without becoming a tool for division or a weapon in the hands of new forces? Legal, institutional, and societal challenges intertwine to pose real obstacles to the emergence of a free and responsible media. Overcoming this impasse requires integrated strategies that protect freedom of expression while preventing the exploitation of media platforms to justify crimes or fuel hate speech.

Challenges that haunt the media future

- A legal vacuum threatens independence: Syria has long suffered from a lack of legislation protecting press freedom and ensuring its independence, while simultaneously criminalizing incitement to violence and justifying violations. This legal vacuum leaves the media landscape open to manipulation, whether through direct political exploitation or through invisible pressure from new power centers.

- **Dilapidated Infrastructure and Scarce Funding:** Post-Assad Syrian media inherits a heavy legacy of corruption, strict censorship, and the destruction of media infrastructure during the years of conflict. This deteriorating situation renders media organizations unable to fulfill their role in uncovering the truth and promoting transparency. Independent organizations also suffer from a stifling funding crisis that limits their ability to develop content, train staff, and provide a safe working environment, especially in remote or conflict-affected areas.
- **Societal rifts reflected in the media landscape:** The years of war have revealed deep sectarian and regional divisions, which some media platforms have deepened by adopting biased and polarizing discourse. As a result, a large segment of the public has lost confidence in the media in general, even independent media, hindering the construction of a comprehensive national narrative and threatening the reconciliation project at its foundation.

A Roadmap for Media Serving Transitional Justice

A. Establishing a balanced legal structure:

The transitional phase requires a legislative revolution that reshapes the relationship between the media, the state, and society. New laws must guarantee the right to freedom of expression without arbitrary restrictions, while also establishing clear controls that criminalize incitement to violence or the denial of crimes against humanity.

Article (20) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which prohibits hate speech that leads to violence or discrimination, can be used as a model for new Syrian legislation that breaks with the legacy of inflammatory speech that has fueled the conflict for years.

B. Building independent media capacities:

Cooperation with specialized international organizations is a key lever for developing Syrian media during the transitional phase. These partnerships can provide training programs for journalists on advanced digital investigation techniques (OSINT), while also providing financial grants to independent media organizations.

The adoption of a media code of ethics is also an urgent necessity, setting clear ethical standards for journalistic coverage that rejects hate speech, justification of crimes, and violations of victims' privacy, while maintaining a professional commitment to the values of transitional justice.

C. Instilling a culture of justice in the community consciousness:

The media, in cooperation with civil society organizations, should launch broad awareness campaigns on the dangers of justifying violations and the importance of fair accountability. These campaigns aim to dismantle the culture of revenge and replace it with a culture that believes in legal recourse as the only means of achieving justice.

Talk shows can play a pivotal role in strengthening communication among the various components of Syrian society by bringing together representatives of diverse political, ethnic, and religious groups and guiding the discussion toward building common ground for national reconciliation.

D. Developing an anti-misinformation system:

In the age of open information, the importance of establishing advanced mechanisms to combat media disinformation is highlighted. Global experiences can be leveraged to develop electronic monitoring programs to track and counter hate speech with compelling arguments, rather than simply preventing it.

Systematic training in digital verification techniques also represents a strategic investment in combating waves of misleading news and fake content, especially on social media platforms, which have become a major arena for shaping public opinion.

E. Putting victims at the heart of media coverage:

The media should adopt a «victims first» strategy in its coverage of violations. This approach focuses on amplifying the voices of those affected and ensuring redress for them, while avoiding language that incites revenge or reinforces divisions, in order to preserve the process of national reconciliation.

Restructuring official media institutions is a crucial step, transforming them from mouthpieces of power into independent public entities. Local and international support funds can be established to ensure the continuity of free media and its independence from political and economic pressures.

To ensure the accuracy of published information, close cooperation channels must be established between media institutions, judicial bodies, and human rights organizations. This will allow for the documentation of violations based on solid legal evidence and prevent the manipulation of facts amidst political tensions.

FIFTH: CONCLUSION: FREE MEDIA, GUARDIAN OF MEMORY AND MAKER OF THE FUTURE:

The Syrian media landscape has undergone radical transformations since the outbreak of the popular uprising in 2011, overcoming decades of absolute censorship and embracing a more pluralistic space despite all the risks. Amid the flames and destruction, independent and citizen journalism has emerged as a vital witness to history, documenting violations, calling for accountability, and confronting attempts to obscure the truth—all despite the heavy price journalists have paid in terms of their freedom and lives.

This new journalistic model, despite its fragility and challenges, has proven its ability to convey the voices of victims inside and outside Syria, establishing a collective memory that could serve as a fundamental basis for future criminal investigations and truth commissions. However, the media landscape still suffers from profound structural problems, most notably the absence of a legal framework protecting press freedoms and deterring hate speech, in addition to the infiltration of sectarian and regional polarizations into the heart of media work.

This analysis leads us to two fundamental truths:

- **First**, transitional justice is difficult to achieve without a free and responsible press. Official institutions alone are incapable of achieving accountability, uncovering the truth, and empowering victims to express themselves, let alone facilitating the complex societal dialogue necessary for building genuine reconciliation.
- **Second**, it is necessary to strike a delicate balance between freedom of expression and preventing the exploitation of media platforms to promote crimes. The absence of balanced regulation of media discourse could open the door wide for instigators to use these platforms to justify the atrocities of war or reproduce the same narratives that have fueled repression for decades.

Building transitional justice in a country torn apart by years of violence and tyranny is no easy task. However, a free media, with the necessary legal protection and resources, remains the strongest guarantee for preserving collective memory and preventing the recurrence of past tragedies in new forms. A society that places the rights of victims at the core of its concerns and responds to their demands for justice requires a professional, committed media system that places the truth at its core and operates with integrity, impartiality, and accuracy—a guardian of memory, a witness to the present, and a contributor to building a more just and humane future.

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Notice:

We salute and express our gratitude to everyone who has taken up a pen or camera in the face of tyranny, and we affirm that the desired transitional justice will not be achieved without a free and independent media that continues to carry the torch and illuminates the path toward a Syria that respects human rights and guarantees the dignity of its citizens.



SYRIAN NETWORK
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



info@snhr.org
www.snhr.org

No justice without accountability

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