Strategies and (Survival) Tactics: The Case of Syrian Oppositional Media in Turkey

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the regulatory, financial and political environment negotiated by oppositional Syrian media operating in exile in Turkey, as well as to identify the main tactics used by them in negotiating between these constraints to ensure their survival in an increasingly difficult environment. As the war in Syria increased in intensity, many oppositional media chose to move their centres of operations into Turkey—forcing them to adapt to a completely foreign regulatory environment, and an unstable political context. Furthermore, and in parallel, their institutional links with the media development sector were being deepened as well. The study draws on in-depth interviews with Syrian media professionals in Turkey, as well as with their interlocutors in international media development organizations. Using Michel de Certeau’s model of strategies and tactics the study aims at arriving at a better understanding of the complex system of choices made by exilic media organizations to guarantee their survival and achieve their objectives. Within the strategic universes circumscribed by the powerful institutional actors of the Turkish state and the international media development sphere, one can locate the agency of Syrian media actors in their responsive tactical manoeuvrings. The article contends that the tactics employed are also reflective of the identity of these media actors located at the intersection of the alternative, exilic and oppositional.

Keywords

Syria, Turkey, alternative, exilic, oppositional, strategies and tactics, media development.

Introduction

The Syrian uprising of 2011 and the subsequent conflict led to an abrupt collapse in the Syrian government’s control of the media sphere in the country. A mushrooming sphere of media activists, collectives and new media initiatives soon emerged (De Angelis, 2014). As the conflict turned more brutal, many of these actors started migrating to Turkey and attempting to turn their activist initiatives into stable oppositional media outlets with the financial and capacity-building assistance of international media development organisations. Turkey, at the time, provided a stable and fertile ground for such
development with an open-door policy towards Syrian refugee, few restrictions on their work and a
political stance that is favourable to the uprising from which these media actors emerged. This led to a
period of significant development both in breadth and depth of this new sphere of media (Issa, 2016;
Dollet, 2015; Trombetta, 2018). These factors also helped shape the identity of this sphere along the
nodes of alternative, exilic and oppositional media outlets.

Since 2016, however, changes in the environment within which these organisations operate
have brought about a set of adverse conditions that have greatly impeded their growth and threatened
their overall survival. These changes can be seen as emanating from shifts in the strategies and
increased pressures from the two main institutional actors the media organisations have to deal with:
the Turkish authorities and the international media development organisations and their donors. This
study aims to scope this new strategic universe that oppositional media organisations in Turkey have
to navigate and to explore some of the tactics they use to mitigate these pressures and ensure their
survival within adverse climate. The study is based on a series of in-depth interviews with Syrian media
actors as well as international media development implementers. It uses Michel de Certeau’s (1980)
model of strategies and tactics in conceptualising the manoeuvrings of media actors.

Strategies and tactics

In order for us to map the manoeuvrings of oppositional Syrian media in their quest to survive
in Turkey, it would be helpful to put to use Michel de Certeau’s model of strategies and tactics. In The
Practice of Everyday Life, published in French in 1980, Certeau establishes a conceptual map of
strategies as the enactment or postulation of power by privileged actors, and tactics as the manoeuvring
of the dominated subject in refracting and negotiating this power. Strategies, as Silverstone notes, are
‘the games of the powerful, occupying privileged theoretical and material places’ (1989: 82). As an
enactment of power, they are the prerogative of institutions in their attempt to delimit and circumscribe
the space of action through mapping, guiding and disciplining. Strategies establish, and circumscribe,
the universe where action is constrained or enabled to the benefit of the privileged actors dispensing
such power. Tactics, on the other hand, are the ‘art of the weak’ in the total absence of power (de
Certeau, 1980: 6). They are calculated, limited actions that depend on the constant probing and
prodding of gaps and cracks in the circumscribed grid of power to allow for a more positive immediate
outcome for the subject. Tactics involve the constant navigation of a foreign landscape constituted and
administered by the strategies of the powerful, or to use Certeau’s metaphor, ‘it is movement “in the
enemy’s field of vision”’ (1980: 6). Thus, tactics, as interventions, are, by definition, highly responsive
to subtle changes in the exercise of power in the strategic universe they inhabit and to opportunities for
claiming advantage, co-option or subversion of elements in that strategic universe.

Certeau’s notions of strategies and tactics have been very influential in studying the agentic
dimension of resistance at a micro level. This has been a running concern for researchers looking into
practices of consumption (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006; Dobscha, 1998), citizenship and urbanism (Secor,
2004; Vearey, 2010), as well as the practices of social media users (Manovich, 2009; De Ridder, 2015). Nevertheless, this study would also contend that Certeau’s concepts can be equally useful in investigating the tactical manoeuvring of weak actors on a macro level.

Syrian oppositional media in this context have to navigate their way through two such strategic landscapes: a) one which is dominated by the administrative and policing power of the Turkish state under which jurisdiction and protection they reside, b) another which is dominated by the financial and knowledge power of the international media development community whose resources and assistance they expend. In both contexts the media actors are significantly disadvantaged and outgunned relative to the institutional actors they need to work with, both in terms of size and the resources they can leverage. Thus, the challenge of survival becomes one of continuous tactical repositioning and fine-tuning of their operations to take advantage of any opportunities that may arise to advance their position, or to avoid a mortal blow.

Alternative, exilic and oppositional media

The growing literature on non-mainstream media presents us with a copious number of labels to describe these media organisations according to one or more of their salient features (Kenix, 2014). Nevertheless, as Kenix argues, alternative is still the most widely used descriptor for this diverse sphere of media, especially with regard to the difference in ownership models between mainstream and non-mainstream media (2014: 67). Syrian media born after the 2011 uprising and subsequent civil war are often referred to ‘alternative’ or ‘emerging’ media (Badran and De Angelis, 2016; Charaf, 2014). Nevertheless, it would also be very useful to explore the two other definitional notions connected to the specific sphere of Syrian media in Turkey today, that is, as exilic and oppositional media. These primary nodal points emphasise different aspects of the media organisation but are also locked into an intricately intertwined relationship with each other. It is along the intersection of the alternative, exilic and oppositional that one can locate the identity of Syrian media in Turkey.

The oppositional and alternative identities can be seen as foundational in the emergence of these media outlets in the short months after the 2011 uprising (Badran and Smets, 2018). Fuchs emphasises the ideological oppositional component in his approach to alternative media as critical media that offers content that ‘expresses oppositional standpoints that question all forms of heteronomy and domination’ (2010: 179). Under repressive or authoritarian media environments the oppositional politics of alternative media becomes even more pronounced as a crucial element of the identity of these media. Oppositional alternative media in these contexts offer challenges to the repressive regime, articulate oppositional discourses and in some cases act as a check on the further encroachment of the repressive apparatus of the state (see for example Lee, 2001 on China; Olukotun, 2002 on Nigeria). Moreover, these contexts provide ample examples of how tactics are leveraged, in the absence of power, to resist the strategies of powerful institutions (Lim, 2012; Raley, 2009). The exilic condition accentuates a further facet of these media organisations, that is, their forced departure and
transplantation in a foreign landscape. The extraordinary situation of exile, especially in connection with the oppositional identity, establishes itself as a mode of journalism that is ‘politically driven as well as transnational in scope’ focusing on audiences and content in the homeland, and can be seen as distinct from ethnic or diasporic media (Shumow, 2014: 1079). Hamid Naficy, in their study on Iranian exilic cinema, also notes the political and ideologically oppositional identity underpinning their work so that the filmmakers tend to define ‘all things in their lives not only in relationship to the homeland but also in strictly political terms’ (2001: 12).

The positioning of media organisations at the intersection of these three identities has significant implications on what tactics they choose to deploy to ensure their survival. The oppositional and exilic mode of operations places significant constraints on their ability to adapt their political stance in adverse contexts. Nevertheless, the narrower scope of their oppositional politics can also be an advantage under certain conditions. The alternative and exilic conditions bring about another gamut of challenges, in particular with relation to their financial sustainability and their dependence on grant and assistance funding which are seen as ethically preferable to other sources of financing (Cook, 2016b, 2016a).

**Media development**

Media development, or assistance, has grown in importance as a subfield of the global development agenda especially since the 1990s. In real terms, however, funding for media development, at 0.4%, remains fractional relative to the overall development aid sector (Cauhapé-Cazaux and Kalathil, 2015). The broad outlines of the field include initiatives focusing on support for independent media, freedom of expression and of the press, media law reform and investigative journalism (Waisbord and Jones, 2010). Conceptually, three main approaches to media and communication development can be sketched (Noske-Turner, 2017; adapted from Manyozo, 2012). The first approach, *media for development*, places the emphasis on the role media can play in development. The second approach, *media development*, focuses on media industries and on supporting a well-functioning media sector as a pre-condition for good governance. Finally, the last approach places the emphasis on the participatory potential of media and its role in engaging communities (Noske-Turner, 2017: 55).

Since the early 1990s, the media development paradigm became increasingly entangled with theories of political (democratic) transition (Berger, 2010; Higgins, 2014; Thomas and van de Fliert, 2014: 5). The driving force behind this is the widespread belief, according to Miller (2009), among media development practitioners and donors that their work constitutes:

a kind of supra-political, even altruistic technology transfer. Exporting Western journalism as a means of establishing democracy, from this point of view, is hardly contentious; it is, instead, a gift, from the developed West to the “transitional” or
developing Rest. Similarly, media assistance NGOs – creative implementers of donor projects – view themselves as being, on the one hand, uniquely autonomous humanitarians and, on the other, apolitical technicians with a valuable skill to impart (2009: 10).

Miller (2009) critiques such idealization by pointing out the political and ideological interests inherent in such political-cultural interventions. Moreover, they also problematise the unique power position of NGOs as the main conduit and implementers of these interventions (Miller, 2009). Indeed, according to a report by the US-based Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report on official development assistance for media, 30% of such assistance is disbursed and managed by such donor-national or international NGOs (Cauhapé-Cazaux and Kalathil, 2015: 15).

Media development programs are broadly articulated through ideal notions of independent media, journalistic professionalism and freedom of expression. However, according to (Waisbord and Jones, 2010), the meanings and specific articulation and operationalisation of such notions across different contexts often remain vague. Such conceptual blindspots, as analysed by Waisbord and Jones (2010), ultimately lead to ‘disconnections between the rationale for the program, the goals, and the activities … [and] have had a disabling effect on long-term impact assessment and measurement’ (Noske-Turner, 2017: 52). This disconnect can be found in the institutional imperatives that encourage short-term measurements (Waisbord and Jones, 2010) as well as in the prevalence of some debatable assumptions about the function of media development (Berger, 2010).

Thus, the idealised notion of media development practitioners as apolitical technicians simply imparting skills does not stand. Such programs create strategic landscapes underpinned by the values of the implementing organisations and the interests of the donor bodies. The beneficiaries of these programs must navigate the constraining and enabling functions of this landscape in their attempts to secure financial survival and sustainability of their work and thus the perpetuation of their political and ideological cause.

**Methodology and context**

This study relies mainly on a number of semi-structured in-depth interviews held with Syrian media actors including editors-in-chief, managers and founders of a diverse array of Syrian media outlets still active in Turkey today (see table 1). The names of the interviewees and the media outlets were withheld at their request and to allow for a candid discussion of some sensitive topics such as their residency and work permit status, among others. The interviews were held, and recorded, over Skype between February and March 2018. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, and the quotes were translated to English by the researcher. Due to the high turnover rate in this media sphere care was taken in choosing outlets that have been in continuous operation for a significant period (at least
since 2014), and thus are better placed to reflect on changes in the context and their responses to it. The discussions explored the current position of the media organisation in terms of its legal status and that of its workers, as well as the operations of the outlet, its content production and targeted audience. Moreover, the interviews discussed the organisation’s relationship with the Turkish state, any difficulties they faced in their operations in the country and how that relationship developed over the course of their existence. Finally, the interviews also inquired about the organisation’s links with international media development partners, its evolution and the challenges and opportunities it provided. Moreover, a number of semi-structured interviews were conducted with five current, and two former, Syria program officers and directors from three international media development organisations that have long been involved in supporting oppositional Syrian media (see table 1). The interviews explored the visions and objectives of the different media development activities, how they were articulated and negotiated with the local media organisations and the difficulties, challenges and opportunities they faced in the broader relationship with the local partners and with the Turkish government. Two of the interviews were conducted over Skype while the others were conducted in person at the respective offices of the interviewees. All of these interviews were conducted in English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SM1</td>
<td>Print/online website</td>
<td>Founder, editor-in-chief</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>7 February 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM2</td>
<td>Print, online website</td>
<td>Founder, editor-in-chief</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>9 February 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM3</td>
<td>Print, online website</td>
<td>Founder, editor-in-chief</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>13 February 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM4</td>
<td>Print, online website</td>
<td>Co-founder, editor-in-chief</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>14 February 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM5</td>
<td>Radio, online website</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>15 February 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM6</td>
<td>Radio, online website</td>
<td>Founder, manager</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>18 February 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM7</td>
<td>Online website</td>
<td>Executive editor</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>27 March 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INGO1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Program officer</td>
<td>In-person</td>
<td>20 February 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INGO2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Program officer</td>
<td>In-person</td>
<td>20 February 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>INGO3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Former program director</td>
<td>In-person</td>
<td>20 February 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>INGO4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Program director</td>
<td>In-person</td>
<td>21 February 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>INGO5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Program director</td>
<td>In-person</td>
<td>16 March 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>INGO6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Former program director</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>26 March 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INGO7</td>
<td></td>
<td>Project manager</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>29 March 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Overview of interviews conducted with Syrian media actors (SM) and international media development actors (INGO).
The study is also enriched with data collected by the researcher in two prior unpublished mapping studies of Syrian emerging media (2014 and 2015) conducted within the context of a collaboration with Danish media development organisation, International Media Support (IMS). Moreover, field notes from conversations the researcher had with Syrian media actors and international actors, during numerous meetings, conferences and workshops are also used in providing a more holistic contextualisation of the study.

Syrian context

Oppositional Syrian media in Turkey today invariably trace their roots to the 2011 uprising and its aftermath. The development of these media can be sketched in three main stages. Their inception is often found in the media activist collectives that played an important role in mediating and reporting on the early stages of the uprising with the main aim of providing counter-narratives to those of the Syrian regime (Ahmad and Hamasaeed, 2015; De Angelis, 2011). As the military conflict escalated starting in 2012, these collectives and media activists started shifting their role to that of oppositional media outlets. This shift was also concurrent to a gradual exodus towards opposition-controlled regions and eventually into exile in Turkey’s border regions. The media’s move to a more stable and secure locale, combined with the Turkish government’s initial laissez-faire policy (see next section) and the inflow of international media development aid, provided fertile ground for a rapid expansion of the Syrian oppositional media sphere and laid down the foundations for processes of professionalisation and institutionalisation (De Angelis, 2014; Issa, 2016).

This phase of expansion gradually faltered in late 2015 as a result of a number of changes in the environment. The Syrian conflict had entered a protracted stage where hope of a resolution and a political transition in the country in the relative short-term all but evaporated. This led to gradual shifts in the policies of some of the actors and the media producers themselves. Starting in mid-2015 a shift in Turkish policies towards a broader securitization of the Syrian presence in the country began to emerge. This included tightening the grip of the Turkish state over international and Syrian civil society organisations. Additionally, international media development funders started to gradually scale back their operations in Turkey. Moreover, the trickle of Syrians leaving Turkey into Europe turned into a mass exodus by the summer of 2015. This had the effect of depleting the pool of skilled Syrian labour available for the media organisations. Finally, a spate of assassinations of three Syrian journalists and media activists in Turkey in December 2015, perpetrated by members of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), only added to the instability felt by many Syrian journalists and media professionals (Shoumali, 2015).

The congruence of these different pressures led to a steady decline in the number of active media outlets in Turkey and ushered in a phase of instability with significant threats to the survival of the media organisations left and a pressure to consolidate their operations. The following sections will attempt to unpack these developments and to outline the survival tactics deployed by Syrian oppositional media still active in Turkey today.
Strategic landscape of Turkish policy

It is difficult to draw a complete picture of the Turkish policy response to the arrival of Syrian oppositional media after the 2011 uprising, largely because there was very little in terms of a formalized coherent regulatory response to this particular sphere of activity. Nevertheless, one can draw the contours of an evolving approach towards the media by looking at the intersection of two main policy areas: a) the authorities evolving approach towards the much larger civil society sphere involved in the Syrian crisis (mainly Syrian and international organisations delivering humanitarian and development aid), b) the government’s broader migration policies towards the Syrian refugee community in Turkey. It is important to also keep in mind the broader backdrop of the relationship between media and authority in Turkey and the media capture processes under the Erdogan government (Yesil, 2016; Tunç, 2018). Nevertheless, Syrian oppositional media in Turkey occupy a space that is largely separate and isolated from that of Turkish media and thus are directly influenced by, and far more reactive to, the aforementioned policy areas rather than the changes in the broader media environment.

The evolution in the Turkish policies and the logics underlying their actions can be divided into two main phases. A laissez-faire period that lasted roughly until late 2015 characterized by almost complete non-interference of the Turkish authorities in the workings of the sphere of oppositional Syrian media that was growing rapidly in the country. A second phase, starting in 2016, where the Turkish authorities, while turning a blind eye to much of the media’s presence and activities, nevertheless announced their presence more forcefully on the scene.

Laissez-faire

During this period the Turkish authorities largely followed a policy of non-interference. Scores of international and Syrian-led non-governmental organisations operated freely from Turkey without official permission or registration. This included the emerging media organisations who were moving their operations and offices from inside Syria into Turkey. The border provinces of Gaziantep, Hatay and Kilis hosted some of the larger concentrations of Syrian refugees and, by consequence, related civil society organisations. Gaziantep, just across from the Syrian border, became the main hub for Syrian media organisations (Dollet, 2015; Morris, 2014). Moreover, during this period Turkey maintained an open-border policy with Syria where refugees and civil society actors could cross the border largely unimpeded in both directions, especially at the opposition-controlled border crossings (Okyay, 2017). The highly-porous border meant that the media outlets could continue their reporting, distribution and broadcasting inside Syria while their fixed operations were based in Turkey. Buttressed by financial support from numerous international media development organisations, a flourishing media scene emerged during this period. Scores of radios, newspapers, and online media projects were established at the time, while numerous trainings and coaching workshops for Syria-based reporters and journalists were often held in Turkey (De Angelis et al., 2014). One example of the significant investments in Syrian media at the time was the Syrian Media Incubator established in Gaziantep.
between January 2014 and December 2015 by Canal France International (CFI), the French media development agency, with funding from the European Union. The 2.5-million-euro project had the aim of ‘strengthen[ing] the role of the Syrian media in the production and broadcasting of reliable, balanced news,’ and ‘to train journalists to produce high-quality news’ and it offered working space, trainings and funding for more than 200 Syrian media organisations and journalists (CFI, n.d.).

It is important to note that none of these projects and media organisations were registered as such in Turkey. Moreover, most of the journalists, editorial or management staff of the Syrian media organisations had no work permits in Turkey, while some did not have valid residency papers, having crossed the border at informal crossings. This is in line with the broader Syrian presence in Turkey which was largely informal, fluid and unregulated up to that point\(^1\).

**Turning a blind eye**

Turkey started tightening its open-door policy in 2015 leading to a full securitization of the border with Syria by October 2015 (Kaymaz and Kadkoy, 2016; Okay, 2017). Moreover, the visa-waiver afforded to Syrians traveling to Turkey was rescinded in January 2016 (Heck and Hess, 2017). Additionally, 2016 also saw an increase in political instability in Turkey, and a failed coup d’état against the Erdogan government. Turkey also become directly involved militarily in the Syrian conflict with Operation Euphrates Shield. Finally, the Turkish authorities started applying more rigorously the regulations on the workings of international and Syrian non-governmental organisations, which culminated in a major crackdown on US humanitarian aid organisations operating in Turkey in 2017 (Mellen and Lynch, 2017). This included ad-hoc police searches of Syrians and civil society workers, as well as random enforcement of fines on those without valid working permits.

There was no concerted campaign from the Turkish authorities on media organisations either with mass closures nor with effective application of labour laws on their staff. Nevertheless, the restrictions on mobility meant that movement between Syria and Turkey was significantly curtailed which has made it significantly more difficult for print media to distribute their newspapers and magazines inside Syria. Moreover, the progressively more restrictive conditions and rules for travel within Turkey for most Syrian residents also made it very difficult for media organisations to operate. More broadly, the actions of Turkish authorities vis-à-vis civil society were seen as an announcement of their closer monitoring of the sector and their intention to be more active in its regulation, even if they had yet to take any broad actions to curtail it. The contradictions within and between different policies and actions by the Turkish government creates a state of protracted legal limbo for both the individuals and the organisations. These legal ambiguities and contradictory policy regimes coalesce in a strategic landscape that strips Syrians of their ‘political subjectivity and ability to claim rights under the international refugee protection regime’ (Baban et al., 2017: 99). The congruence of these different developments makes for a precarious environment for Syrian oppositional media in Turkey where their long-term viability within the country becomes less certain.
Strategic landscape of media development

Before 2011 there was some funding for media development initiatives in Syria (Brownlee, 2017). This funding, however, was mostly through small grants and projects or as part of larger regional initiatives. The 2011 uprising and subsequent conflict brought about a tremendous quantitative and qualitative shift in the allocated funding and in the overall strategy of the large donor bodies. The main international donor bodies involved in this effort included, among others, USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), the European Commission through their European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), as well as the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). Much of this funding was channelled and implemented by international media development organisations such as Canal France International (CFI), Internews, FPU and IMS.

The overall aim of the initial response, according to one former program director at an international media development organisation, was to alleviate the effects of the crisis specifically by improving the quality of journalistic information available to the Syrian population. The initiatives focused on increasing the capacity of media workers and journalists, ensuring their digital and physical safety through specific trainings, and providing the audience with the means to access information (INGO, 2018, personal communication, 26 March). The support was channelled through trainings, workshops, equipment, as well as core funding to support the operations of the media organisations. While the abundance of funding allowed for a flourishing media environment in that period it was also plagued by familiar issues of lack of coordination, duplication of effort, and the absence of a broader and collective strategic vision among the different interventions (Marrouch, 2014). Starting in 2013 some efforts were taken towards fostering a more collaborative environment. Most notable of these were the coordination meetings organised by the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) that brought together international media development organisations and Syrian local partners in an effort to foster closer cooperation across the board with some success. The coordination meetings culminated in a white paper issued by the GFMD after consultations with the participants. The white paper provided a set of recommendations for media assistance in Syria including calling for a ‘long-term, flexible and adequately-funded approach’ as well as mechanisms for coordinating and providing assistance more effectively, among others (GFMD, 2015). However, these efforts were soon overtaken by developments on the ground including shifts in Turkish policies and in some donor priorities.

Strategically, one can observe a considerable alignment on a macro level between the modus operandi of international media development organisations and the professed needs of their partners among Syrian media outlets in Turkey. Thus, the emphasis, in broad terms, on institutional and capacity building, time and people management, developing secure systems of operation and accounting, was in line with both the needs and objectives of Syrian media actors and the objectives of their international partners. It was on the micro level—how these needs were addressed and where—that divergences occurred. This can partly be down to the short-term institutional demands placed on implementer organisations to show results whereby they channel support to ‘organisations with low-risk, high-
sustainability potential, rather than where it is most needed’, in order to show their donors ‘nice case studies of partners’ (INGO6 2018, personal communication, 26 March).

We can observe a similar pattern on the level of values. There is a broad alignment on a macro level on the overarching values of media independence, freedom of speech and democracy, among others. However, and in line with Waisbord and Jones’s (2010) observations, significant difficulties remain in negotiating these notions and operationalising them in the specific Syrian context. One such example is the drawn-out process of formulating the Ethical Charter, a voluntary self-regulating body of Syrian media. Another example of this difficulty can be observed in discussions with interviewees on the issue of ‘gender mainstreaming’, which represents a large overarching objective in one of the larger media development projects being currently implemented with Syrian media. This overarching objective is developed in a top-down fashion on the basis of the funding body’s priorities, according to an implementing program officer (INGO2 2018, personal communication, 20 February). The program director responsible for implementing the project recognises the difficulty in transposing and negotiating this notion with the local partners. The process, according to them, is a gradual one that aims to sensitise actors to the issue and de-politicise it at the same time through a multiplicity of instruments, with mixed results: trainings, strategy development and thematic funding (INGO4 2018, personal communication, 21 February). Thus, the priorities of the donor bodies provide the strategic universe within which local actors in need of financial support have to manoeuvre and position themselves tactically in order to survive.

(Survival) tactics of Syrian media

Registration

The issue of officially registering the media outlets as legal entities in Turkey was largely moot before 2016. The media organisations were more focused on expanding their operations, professionalising their content and diversifying their funding streams. The instability felt by Syrian media actors in 2016, put the issue of legalising their operations on top of their agenda. As one program officer remarked: ‘There is a double risk for them. A personal one: for them being refugees there, sometimes not having a residency status, most of the time not having a work permit. And as an organization, it’s an additional risk’ (INGO2 2018, personal communication, 20 February). Thus, there was a tacit realisation of the shift in the Turkish policies and registration was seen as a way to bring more stability to the organisation in a chaotic period going forward. This was also a response to the precarious situation that most workers in the field found themselves in, in terms of their personal legal situation. The fact that many of them have no work permits was increasingly becoming a threat to their safety and stability. As one editor-in-chief reflected:

We felt some indirect pressures after they closed down several [civil society] organisations in Gaziantep. We took that as a sign. We felt under a hidden threat: you don’t know when the decision will come to close other organisations here in
Istanbul. So, we registered as a legal entity, and we are working on acquiring work permits (SM4 2018, personal communication, 14 February).

Additionally, registration was seen as a further step in their institutionalisation process and would bring greater credibility to the organisation vis-à-vis their international partners and funders. As one managing editor said:

It was no longer feasible to acquire funding as persons. Having the funds on our personal accounts was creating a serious sense of threat… Moreover, we couldn’t develop, apply for larger grants, do more activities, have more partners, without becoming a legal entity… Registration was part of our own strategic objectives and our track of institutional consolidation (SM7 2018, personal communication, 27 March).

Self-censorship

Another pattern that emerges from the interviews is the attempt of media actors to limit their exposure to the Turkish authorities by censoring their content and limiting its distribution. This self-censorship appears in two distinct forms: 1) limiting the focus of the content and its target audiences to Syrians within Syria and avoiding any commentary on Turkish affairs, 2) censoring content overtly critical of Turkish policies relating to the Syrian crisis and their direct involvement in the conflict.

The first variant is sometimes presented as a way to rationalise the work of the media organisations and to focus their energies on who they see as their main beneficiary: Syrians within Syria, as one editor-in-chief notes (SM1 2018, personal communication, 7 February). Thus, the content of these media is overwhelmingly centred on developments and stories from intramural Syria privileging a large network of reporters across the border. Moreover, the distribution effort, both for print media and broadcast radios, is also targeted at audiences within Syria. However, this tactic is also explicitly linked to attempts to avoid direct conflict with the Turkish authorities. This is also in line with the organisations’ political oppositional stance (Shumow, 2014) that sees their mandate and aims largely through the prism of their political opposition to the regime of Bashar al-Asad in Syria. Thus, Syrian oppositional media in Turkey has largely avoided providing commentary on the tumultuous last few years in Turkey.

Beyond this, however, media actors felt they had broad autonomy over the content they were producing on Syria. This is in large part, of course, due to the fact that their oppositional identity was very much compatible with the Turkish hard-line position towards the Syrian regime and in support of the uprising and rebel forces, as one interviewer noted (SM1 2018, personal communication, 7 February). Nevertheless, as Turkey’s involvement in the military conflict became more direct since 2016, this compatibility came under greater stress, and a more active form of self-censorship of the content was becoming more prevalent. According to most, the Turkish attack on the Kurdish autonomous region
in Afrin in northern Syria in January 2018, was a turning point in this regard. As one interviewer noted, ‘Operation Olive Branch has put us really in a spot of difficulty. There is a widespread feeling that the Turkish authorities are very nervous because of this, and they are unforgiving’ (SM1 2018, personal communication, 7 February). The sense of threat over this issue is indeed palpable, ‘In this case, they [Turkish authorities] drew a very clear red line. If you open your mouth they will deport you’, as another editor-in-chief noted (SM6 2018, personal communication, 18 February). Some attempt to deliver their disapproval of the operation indirectly by criticising the participation of the Syrian rebel groups (Free Syrian Army) rather than criticising the Turkish involvement head-on (SM1 2018, personal communication, 7 February). Additionally, as the media organisations feel they can no longer use their reporters and sources in the Kurdish region for fear of Turkish retaliation and accusations of dealing with ‘terrorists’, they attempt to temper their coverage by relying on the reporting of international news agencies (SM4 2018, personal communication, 14 February).

Finally, the background of the deteriorating context of media freedom in Turkey in general, and in particular with relation to the latest operation in Afrin (Anon, 2018; Ward, 2017), is seen as an ominous warning. As one interviewer noted:

> When you see Turkish journalists with more than 30 years of experience being arrested, and media organisations being closed down, just for sympathizing with civilian casualties in Afrin—it puts you under a certain gag, and it forces you to deal with this issue in a way to ensure the survival of your organization (SM4 2018, personal communication, 14 February).

**Adaptable production**

As media organisations that are almost entirely dependent on media development aid, Syrian actors have had to tap into a variety of funding streams to ensure the continuity and survival of their organisations. One of the more common funding strategies is to allocate resources for projects on the basis of thematic areas that fulfil the larger objectives of the donor body and the media development implementers. These thematic funding streams can be seen as a pull strategy for media development actors to advance the strategic visions of their projects by creating a financial incentive for partners to participate. Thus, it falls on the local media actors to judge how the thematic area fits within their vision and needs, and how to integrate it into their workflows and production.

One of the ways that Syrian media organisations attempt to tackle this issue is by having a flexible content production model. One editor uses the metaphor of IKEA products to refer to the way they attempt to fit different parts together without resorting to damaging the main product. Thus, the thematic funding is seen as filling gaps in coverage or in needs without fundamentally altering the overall stance or identity of the media outlet. In a sense, this involves the media actors negotiating a broad definition of the target thematic area and retaining the autonomy of contributing content through different genres and angles. This negotiation, however, is not always possible, as the editor notes, ‘we had an
offer from an organisation to cover human rights abuses specifically by radical Islamist groups.’ The outlet had to turn down the funding opportunity according to the editor ‘even though as a Syrian you agree that these are terrorist organisations’ (SM4 2018, personal communication, 14 February). The media organisation felt that the conditional focus of the thematic funding, which precluded any investigations of human rights abuses by the Syrian regime for example, would run contrary to its mission and values.

Another example of these adaptation tactics and manoeuvring is one where one online highbrow magazine broadened the scope of its content to include shorter and less dense content in their attempt to secure their sustainable funding:

We decided that it was impossible to get support for the website in the form of an intellectual magazine. We introduced lighter content, to attract a broader appeal. Where the empirical content—more storytelling, in-depth and feature reports— would fund the more intellectual and theoretical content (SM7 2018, personal communication, 27 March).

These manoeuvrings are essential tactical moves that ensure that the media organisations can position themselves as supportable vis-à-vis their institutional partners in media development organisations, and thus guarantee their financial well-being. Nevertheless, the level of flexibility and manoeuvrability of the organisation is always measured against its underlying oppositional politics and objectives.

**Conclusion**

By superimposing the two main strategic landscapes that Syrian oppositional media in Turkey have to navigate, this paper has attempted to arrive at a better understanding of the choices made by these organisations and the survival tactics they employ. What emerges is a complex array of interactions, retreats, and adaptations on the part of the media actors. These actions are highly sensitive to subtle shifts in policy logics or priorities, and aim, first and foremost, at keeping the organisation afloat. Nevertheless, the specific articulation of the organisations’ identities introduces other variables that should be taken into account in understanding their chosen courses of action.

The precarity, legal as well as economical, that these media organisations find themselves in pushes them towards avenues that mitigate this situation. Registration offers one such avenue according to the media actors. Even when taking into account the pressures on the rule of law in today’s Turkey, being a recognised legal entity provides the media actors, both as individuals and as organisations, some protection from the ambiguous and arbitrary activation and application of regulations. Moreover, the different manners in which the media actors resort to in censoring their content that is critical of Turkish policies, and to remain under the radar, also reflects their priority in protecting the survival of their media organisation under adverse conditions. Furthermore, the
adaptation of their content production serves also as a cushion to respond quickly to shifting priorities of donor bodies and to position themselves favourably to receive that critical financial support in the absence of other acceptable avenues for acquiring funding.

Finally, these survival tactics should also be seen as tempered and conditioned by the specific articulation of the organisations’ identities along the nodes of alternative, exilic and oppositional. Thus, it is through the prism of this specific articulation that all opportunities for advancement are measured against. This can have the effect of constraining some of the choices an organisation makes, such as refusing some conditional funding, or enabling and legitimising others, such as the choice to ignore Turkish internal affairs in their coverage.

Notes

1 Turkey applies a geographic limitation to the 1951 Geneva Convention and thus Syrians are not entitled to a refugee status in Turkey. The large numbers of Syrians flooding to Turkey following its open-door policy were referred to as ‘guests’, an informal designation. In 2014 Turkey moved to regularise the situation of Syrian refugees by passing a law that granted them a status of ‘temporary protection’, which while granting them access to public health and education services excluded them from the labour market. Between 2011 and 2015 only 7,500 Syrians were granted work permits, out of 750,000 who are eligible to work (Kaymaz and Kadkoy, 2016). Thus, the vast majority were participating in the informal labour market.

2 See for example Damascus Bureau ([https://iwpr.net/people/damascusbureau](https://iwpr.net/people/damascusbureau)), a project funded by the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) or the Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ) ([http://en.arij.net](http://en.arij.net)) a regional network of journalists partly funded by Danish NGO International Media Support (IMS).

3 Much of this funding was part of the Syria Regional Program (SRP) I & II. For more details see [https://www.usaid.gov/political-transition-initiatives/syria](https://www.usaid.gov/political-transition-initiatives/syria).

4 Other instruments included the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDH) and the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP). For more details see [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/syria_el](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/syria_el).

5 For more details see [https://www.sida.se/English/where-we-work/Asia/syria/our-work-in-syria/](https://www.sida.se/English/where-we-work/Asia/syria/our-work-in-syria/).

6 A significant proportion of US funding, however, is channeled through specialized for-profit development companies such as Chemonics ([https://www.chemonics.com/](https://www.chemonics.com/)), Creative Associates International ([https://www.creativeassociatesinternational.com](http://arkgroupdmcc.com)) and ARK Group ([http://arkgroupdmcc.com](http://arkgroupdmcc.com)). This support is usually very opaque and difficult to track down.

7 For example, the Syria Response Group was established to coordinate emergency assistance for Syrian journalists under threat. See [https://syriaresponsegroup.org/en/index.html](https://syriaresponsegroup.org/en/index.html).

8 See for example the EC’s shift towards emphasizing media for development, rather than media development in their priorities: ‘Needs for supporting civil society organisations notably through media’ (EC, 2016: 11 Annex 1).
References


