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Interacting in a context of war: Communication Spaces in Idlib

As the traditional communication infrastructure in Syria collapsed shortly into the 2011 civil conflict, new mixed environments emerged to replace it. In this context Syrians were forced to experiment with innovative and creative ways of exchanging information and of keeping in contact with each other. In particular they combine different technologies and tools, both old and modern, to achieve a functional and efficient communication space. These tools include everything from hand-to-hand mail to walkie-talkie broadcasts, and from face-to-face communication to community radios. This article aims to analyze, through a sociological-ethnographic approach, the practices of communication in Syria focusing in particular on the region of Idlib.

Interagir dans un contexte de guerre : espaces de communication dans la province d'Idlib

L'infrastructure traditionnelle de communication en Syrie s'est effondrée peu de temps après l'entrée dans le conflit civil en 2011. Dans ce contexte les Syriens ont été forcés d'expérimenter des moyens novateurs et

créatifs en vue d'échanger des informations et de rester en contact les uns avec les autres. En particulier, ils combinent différentes technologies et outils, anciens et modernes, pour réaliser un espace de communication fonctionnel et efficace. Ces outils incluent tout, du courrier à la main aux transmissions par talkie-walkie, et de la communication face à face vers les radios communautaires. Cet article a pour objectif d'analyser, à travers une approche sociologique-ethnographique, les pratiques de communication en Syrie en se concentrant notamment sur la région d'Idlib.

Introduction: reconnecting Syrians in times of war

The revolts in 2011 inevitably had a strong impact on the ways Syrians communicate with each other and consume media content. During the last five years, communication has played a particularly relevant role in Syria. A conflict of information between pro- and anti-regime sources accompanied the conflict on the ground, trying to win the hearts and minds both of Syrians and of the international community.¹ Syrians opposing the regime used new technologies extensively in order to produce and distribute their narratives.² A new generation of media outlets has emerged: radios, printed newspapers, news agencies, and websites.³

Indeed, in the last few years the role of new and traditional media in the Syrian uprising has received much attention both by journalistic sources and academic research. However, less attention has been paid to how ordinary citizens in Syria had to adapt the ways of communicating with each other in the context of their daily lives.

These transformations have to be contextualized in the wider changes of the social environment during the last five years. Indeed, the war affected Syrians' social interactions in many ways. Large numbers of people were dislocated from one region to another or had to leave the country. In other cases, movement was highly limited because of checkpoints, snipers, or indiscriminate bombing. The effects of the war on electricity, telephone landlines, and Internet access substantially transformed how Syrians could access and use media tools and devices. At the same time, the popular mobilization and the political context

increased the need for activists and ordinary citizens to get information and to be connected.

All these elements contributed to radical changes in the social environment of large swaths of the Syrian population, with consequences that have yet to be addressed and will probably have a strong impact on Syrian society in the long term. In fact, the conflict reshaped the previous connection networks of Syrians, sometimes creating separation and lack of communication, and in other times encouraging new forms of interaction that increased mutual knowledge. As Ali Safar, a journalist working for *Radio Sawt Raya*, has said, one of the most important achievements of the Syrian uprising was that Syrians from different regions and social classes got to know each other.⁴

This article aims at investigating how ordinary Syrian citizens communicate with each other in times of war. Instead of focusing on mass media, we will focus on how Syrians manage to keep in contact with each other despite the limitations of movement and other difficulties related to the ongoing conflict.

The article relies mainly on five interviews conducted with Syrian journalists and citizens living in, or originally from, the Idlib region.⁵ The in-depth interviews were conducted over Skype in May 2016.

In particular, we decided to focus on the province of Idlib, in the northwest of Syria. The province was one of the first places to have anti-regime demonstrations after Daraa. On 4 June 2011, the town of Jisr al-Shughour witnessed harsh armed clashes between the regime and opposition militias, in one of the first acts of the armed rebellion. The countryside of Idlib, and in particular the region around Jabal al-Zawiyah, was one of the earlier parts of the country to be “liberated”, and has, for the most part, been under the control of opposition forces since early 2012.

For these reasons, the Idlib region is a particularly interesting case when it comes to studying the impact of the war on communications between Syrians. Today, most parts of the governorate is controlled by Jabhat al-Nosra and the Free Syrian Army.

After the regime lost the control of the region, the state shut down all services, including Internet and landline communications. The transportation and trade networks in regions at the center of the conflict, such as Idlib, were hugely disrupted, along with other basic infrastructure such as electricity and telephony. The economic instability, characterized by the collapse of the Syrian Pound, along with

the constant aerial bombardment and clashes, made it impossible to stabilize these ailing structures. Instead, different groups and individuals had to come up with alternatives to the traditional communication infrastructures that were established by the Syrian state.

The disruption and large damage suffered by the communication infrastructure in the region had a tremendous impact on how the residents communicated with each other, and with others from different locales. Thus, we will explore the changes in this regard and then investigate the ways in which locals adapted and responded to these new conditions by exploring different technological solutions and how they are used in daily life in Idlib.

Reconnecting Syrians: reshaping the social environment

As mentioned above, the reinvention of communication practices in Idlib has to be contextualized in how the war affected the social environment and the communication infrastructure that existed before 2011.

In the region, there are several urban centers such as Idlib, Maarra al-Nu'man, Ariha, and Jisr al-Shoughour, all of them surrounded by smaller villages. The relationship between the countryside and the main centers has always been very strong, as a large part of the urban populations came originally from the surrounding villages.

After 2011 and the expulsion of the regime forces from the province, the contacts between the countryside and the urban centers has become more difficult. The presence of checkpoints, armed clashes, the aerial bombardment, and, even more important, the scarcity and rising prices of fuels, made it increasingly difficult to move freely from one place to another. At the same time, the war affected profoundly the social life within each village or urban center.

As Tareq Abdel Haq, the director of the Local Coordination Committee in Jisr al-Shoughour, says: *“The social environment in the town radically changed. There are new people, coming from other parts of the country, and at the same time many people went away from the town. Many people knew each other because of these events. Social relations increased. The lack of electricity push people out of their homes every day and night. And older people do not use the Internet. In addition, many people are unemployed and have more free time. So they tend to meet each other regularly in front of their houses, or in mosques, or in gardens and orchards, and they visit each other more often and tend to pass the nights together. In other words, the war forced Syrians to rely more on each other. They have nothing else.”*⁶

In this sense, the war created forms of disconnection and connection at the same time, transforming local, face-to-face, interactions, but also putting barriers between different areas in the region. Landline communications are only available in some of the more important urban centers, like Saraqeb, and their surroundings, and they allow only local calls within the town or city. In the places where it is available, the service is provided by the former state telecom company employees, but managed by the groups controlling the different areas.⁷ The mobile networks before 2011 are not available anymore, as well as the old Internet services.

In this context, Syrians invented creative ways in order to get in contact with each other where traditional tools are not available. In such a context, characterized by a lack of stability, ordinary citizens have to choose, day by day, how to get in contact with each other depending on the available means.

One example is the mailboxes system used by *Radio Fresh*. The radio mounted physical mailboxes in Kafr Nabel and in other neighboring villages. Today, about 30 of them are available in the region. People can use the mailboxes to send demands and complaints, which the radio personnel regularly collects and transmits through FM signal and then forwards to local authorities or service providers. A program of the radio, named “Shakawa al-Nas” (Complaints of the people) is dedicated to this, also inviting directly Syrian citizens to talk at the studio in Kafr Nabel. Also, the mailboxes are used for some interactive programs offered by the radio, like “Yamit Masa” (Good Evening), hosting competitions with prizes at stake. Citizens in the area can participate by writing their choices and answers and putting them in the mailboxes. Then they will listen at the programs to know if they won. This system, says Raed Fares, director of the radio, enables the people to connect between them even if landlines and other tools of communication are not available.⁸

Emerging media outlets sometimes play a role in connecting people together and offering news on the region to people who were forced to abandon it. As Bligh Souleiman, the director of the Idlib’s office of *Radio Alwan*, says, interactive programs enable people to speak, send messages to each other and to ask about specific people. An example is Nur, a young woman in Sarmeen, close to Idlib, who regularly intervenes in the morning program through Whatsapp or Viber and leaves messages for her son, who works in Turkey.⁹

According to Raed Fares, FM radios or creative systems such as the mailboxes were valuable replacements for Internet access when it was scarcely available.

However, FM radios, as printed newspapers and other traditional media, do not always manage to reach a large audience. Establishing an FM signal is particularly difficult in Syria, both because of the bombings by the regime and the pressures by armed groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. These media outlets are often at the mercy of the armed group in control of the locality. Thus, for example, Radio Fresh's offices in Kafr Nabel were raided several times by Jabhat al-Nusra and, in another famous incident, several print newspapers were burned and their distribution forbidden for several weeks.¹⁰

For these reasons, when Internet connections were reestablished, the Internet became rapidly, and by far, the most practical tool of communication for Syrians. In fact, Syrians in Idlib today mainly resort to two media in order to connect to each other but also to receive crucial information: one is social media platforms like Whatsapp, Skype, Facebook and Viber, and the other one is the use of walkie-talkies.

Going back to new media: the role of the Internet in Idlib

All the Syrians from Idlib we interviewed for this article agree that the Internet is without doubt the most used and relevant tool among the people living in the region at the moment. Apparently, most of the Syrians inhabiting Idlib's province today, even in the remotest villages, have access to an Internet connection today. As mentioned above, the Internet service normally provided by the state-owned Syrian Telecom Company was shut down in areas controlled by the opposition as soon as they fell out of the government's hands.

One of the first alternatives to take hold was satellite Internet access. Satellite Internet equipment (including the antenna, reflective dish and indoor modem) as well as subscription packs, were smuggled through Turkey as early as mid-2012. Initially, satellite services were used only by activists and journalists using it to spread news on the uprising and to communicate with each other; however, with time these satellite services spread significantly.

Soon, every town and small village was provided with satellite Internet connections. Providing Internet services became one of the most common businesses in the region. Depending on the topography of the region, such as the presence of mountains, the initial investment needed varies widely from 1,500 to 20,000 USD, usually provided by a single individual or a group. The money serves to install and run the aforementioned assembly and equipment and then the providers can re-distribute the signal through Wi-Fi to the houses of the single subscribers. Sometimes the investors are the managers of Internet cafés already active before 2011, but the relatively low prices encouraged many other people to do the same, sometimes from their houses.

Providing an Internet connection is particularly easy if compared with other media. All the devices responsible for the transmission do not need much electricity. A basic car battery can even power these devices for more than two weeks. Many of the providers set up generators using gas, enabling them to function also during the increasingly frequent electricity cuts. Recently, Syrians are also importing from Turkey devices producing solar energy, diminishing their need to the increasingly expensive gas or from electricity.¹¹ By late 2012, even small villages in the Idlib province had access to such Internet networks.¹² Moreover, according to Tareq Abdel Haq, “most people use smartphones to access the internet, rather than computers,” which need less power to charge and thus are more suitable for the current conditions in the region.¹³

The initial investment and overhead costs of managing satellite internet connections means that they are significantly more expensive than other alternatives like ADSL cables, with a 100 MB reportedly costing 200 SYP (~1.5 USD) in August 2014.¹⁴ However, the competition between multiple providers, sometimes 2 or 3 in a single small village, kept the prices quite low and the services accessible to most of the houses.

A cheaper alternative that has proved very popular since 2013 was to smuggle Internet service from Turkey by laying down ADSL cables across the border, and to connect them to a network of repeaters that can then broadcast the signal wirelessly to local subscribers. This brought down the price of 100 MB to around half that of satellite Internet at about 100 SYP (0.75 USD in August 2014 rates). The management of such networks is run locally. For example, the city of Maaret Misrin alone, in August 2014, had three different local companies offering Internet subscription services to residents of

the town and surrounding villages.¹⁵ According to Ahmad al-Ahmad, director of the *Syrian Press Center*, based in Idlib, the Internet service based on Turkish networks covers most of the northern regions under opposition control, including Idlib province, Hama countryside, and down to the northern countryside of Homs.¹⁶

The ability of Syrians to rebuild their internet infrastructures, and even to make them more functional and spread than before 2011, made this medium by far the most relevant under all aspects. Media activists and journalists rely on laptops and mobile devices to get in contact with each other and in order to spread content out of Syria. Ordinary citizens use especially mobile devices in order to stay connected with each other. Social media applications, and in particular Whatsapp, Skype, and Viber, help ordinary citizens to communicate with their friends and relatives living in different villages, in different parts of the country, or with the diaspora abroad.

Walkie-talkies: Re-inventing old tools

Similarly to the Internet, mobile phone networks of the two Syrian providers (Syriatel and MTN) are also restricted to regime-controlled regions. In the absence of stable mobile phone coverage, Walkie-Talkies have become, since the beginning of 2013, a ubiquitous and essential replacement in opposition-controlled areas.

Abundantly available at electronics stores in Idlib, and costing between 15-20 USD for the device, walkie-talkies communicate over radio waves for distances of up to 30km on flat ground. As they can be programmed on private wavelengths, the devices became an essential communication device to keep in contact with family members and friends within towns and across villages. Today, almost all the family houses are provided with one walkie-talkie, and some people even do not have mobile phones anymore.¹⁷

With the spread of walkie-talkies, so-called observatories were set up and started to function as local communication nodes. These observatories consisted of a person, or a team of people, stationed on higher terrain with a strong antenna to broadcast messages to the surrounding areas that citizens can listen to on public channels on normal walkie-talkies. The people working there were usually volunteers and ordinary citizens, even if, given their importance, armed groups often can force some influence on some of them. Each of

them is known by its “battle name”, like the “Abu ‘Arab” observatory in Saraqeb.

The presence of observatories assured a longer range and a better signal, at a time when the airwaves had become too overcrowded with individual walkie-talkies. Moreover, the walkie-talkies often had the side effect of adding to rumors in the communication space. The system of observatories helped put more order in a chaotic context. People in need or wanting to offer information could contact directly one of the observatories, which then would re-transmit the information to a larger audience.

As Souleiman says: “You can contact an observatory for any reason. If you had an accident along the road, and there is no one there, you can immediately call the closer observatory and ask for some people to come to your rescue. They are available 24 hours on 24.”¹⁸

According to al-Ahmad, Idlib boasts around 17 main observatories that broadcast around the clock and are followed intently by most people. The observatories, when not relaying essential communications related to airstrikes, also broadcast more varied content such as revolutionary songs and motivational words. Also, they offer general information like merchandise and prices at the markets. According to al-Ahmad, however, many of the operators of these observatories are often “of low education” and often make use of populist, sectarian and inflammatory rhetoric.¹⁹

The walkie-talkies, however, are not just tools for keeping ordinary citizens in contact with each other. They also serve another, more relevant mission, which is to keep abreast of the developing military situation, and especially the movement and sightings of regime warplanes and helicopters. The state’s air force is largely unchallenged in the sky, and has wreaked havoc since the beginning of the conflict on towns and villages in northern Syria, even those deep inside opposition-controlled regions and far from the front. A crude system of early warning built around the walkie-talkie was set up in many areas to allay the dangers of aerial bombardment. “*My walkie-talkie is always turned on,*” says al-Ahmad, “*I even keep it next to me at night, at a lower volume.*”²⁰

The observatories attempt to spot the movement of regime aircraft (even as they depart from military airfields) and to track the direction of that movement. They then issue warnings on open wavelengths, which can then be listened to through normal walkie-talkies. These broadcasts can be essential in telling people of a certain town to stay

in their place, or to hide in the basement, as well as announcing to civil defense corps – the volunteer relief and rescue teams – the locations of airstrikes for prompt aid and rescue responses. *“At night the regime always runs sorties of helicopters and aircrafts equipped with machine guns that target any moving light, such as cars or motorcycles, and thus anyone leaving his house will take a walkie-talkie with him to keep updated on the location of these aircrafts”*, recounts al-Ahmad.²¹

Conclusion

The civil conflict in Syria has had devastating repercussions on the economic and communication infrastructure particularly in regions like Idlib. These regions, despite transitioning out of regime control very early on in the conflict, became a constant battleground between the regime and the opposition. The constant bombardment, economic instability, and fragmentation of political/military authority in these regions meant that the destroyed infrastructure networks (electricity, telephony, transportation) could not be rebuilt in any meaningful way while the conflict continued.

This article attempted to explore what alternative communication spaces and technologies were used by ordinary Syrians to replace them. The reinvention of old and new technologies by activists and normal citizens has to be considered particularly relevant. After five years of conflict and destruction, with no solution at the horizon, frustration and lack of hope are widely spread among Syrians. In this context, the possibility of communicating with each other becomes, even more than a practical matter of survival, a crucial process of keeping alive the social tissue and relationships based on affection.

We find that a variety of solutions and technologies have been adopted in different contexts. Often, these technologies have been adapted and reconfigured to suit the specific conditions of the region. Moreover, the emphasis became on mobile, efficient and distributed infrastructure solutions, rather than on large fixed networks. Thus, ADSL network lines were independently sourced from Turkey and rerouted through the Syrian-Turkish border and then distributed to individual houses in small localities. Similarly, arrays of observatories based on small walkie-talkie broadcast stations, became important early warning systems, and an overall communication node for their locales. These solutions were clearly designed to be as power efficient, and

distributed as possible, to respond to the difficult war conditions, and to the lack of stable power supply.

The different solutions examined by this paper (local mailboxes, walkie-talkies, small-scale Internet access points), offer gradually greater possibilities for communication, but also varying levels of robustness in the conflict conditions. Clearly, Internet access provides the largest array of uses, from communicating with other individuals to accessing information from around the world. However, it is also the most vulnerable to bombardment and power shortages. Moreover, satellite Internet access, while more expensive than the ADSL lines, is more mobile and offers greater flexibility in installation, and is thus more robust than the cheaper alternative. The walkie-talkie makeshift network, while offering less possibilities than the Internet, however, provides a robust and relatively stable system that is perfectly suited to function in emergency situations such as air raids and battles.

Thus, in place of the traditional communication infrastructure networks we find a complex ecosystem of different technologies and solutions that are reconfigured and adapted for the specific conditions of the region. This ecosystem is highly adaptable to the changing conditions. Thus, for example, when the region started enjoying more stability (in early 2016), greater investment was poured into distributed Internet networks based on Turkish ADSL lines, as opposed to satellite internet, or walkie-talkies, which were more popular in 2014, when the threat of daily bombardment was much more imminent. The multiplicity of the solutions we find in this ecosystem corresponds to the necessity of being flexible and robust in the face of adverse conditions, and can be witnessed in other parts of Syria affected by the war.

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