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Syria: Media Reform and Its Limitations

Marwan M. Kraidy

The Syrian media sector is schizophrenic. On the one hand, Syrian musalsalat (television serials) are considered the best in the Arab world and compete head-to-head with their famed Egyptian counterparts. On the other hand, Syrian news and public affairs programming wallows in a protracted crisis exacerbated by an increasingly hostile geopolitical context and the Syrian-Lebanese media war that erupted after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Prompted by news that few Syrians watch state television news, Syrian writer Anwar Al Qassem commented in the London daily *Al Quds Al Arabi* that the motto of Syrian television appears to be “See not, hear not, speak not.” External challenges and loss of audience have driven Syrian media reform attempts, focusing on both the structure of the sector and the screen appearance of Syrian television. The question now is whether Syrian officials can apply to news the policies that produced successful television drama.

Syrian television drama is a stunning success story. Since the 1980s, the Syrian state has offered its production facilities to private directors in return for rights of first broadcast. This drew film makers and writers whose training in Soviet film realism led to stunning videography, solid dialogue, and engaging treatment of historical themes. This in turn attracted Gulf television programmers, who filled their Ramadan schedules with Syrian drama. Increased profits and recognition have emboldened the industry to tackle controversial contemporary issues such as terrorism and AIDS. This success has rattled the Egyptian television industry but also led some venerable figures such as Mohammed Ukasha, Egypt's leading drama writer and director, to collaborate with Syrian actors and directors.

Because Syrian officials have been either reluctant or unable to apply to news and current affairs the lessons of the drama sector, however, Syrian news lags far behind. Following the February 2005 Hariri assassination, Lebanese television networks such as the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) and Future Television (FTV) accused Syria of having played a role in the assassination of Hariri. In addition to their leading status in Lebanon's terrestrial

television landscape, both LBC and FTV have influential satellite channels with significant followings among Syrians and other Arab viewers. With its small following, Syrian state television was no match.

While Syrians, like most Arab viewers, gravitated to LBC's entertainment programs, they were aware of LBC's historically anti-Syrian politics. The surprise came from FTV, whose hitherto accommodating editorial line towards Syria turned vitriolic in the aftermath of the assassination. In its newscasts, talk shows, patriotic music videos, and virtually all other programs, FTV became a full time critic of the Syrian regime, collapsing its terrestrial and satellite broadcasting to become unabashedly “Hariri TV.” It is therefore no surprise that newspapers talked of a “divorce” between Future TV and the Syrian public.

In response to these developments, Syrian officials announced an elaborate “plan to modernize media work,” mentioned in the final resolution of the summer 2005 Baath Party Congress. Before the congress, then-Information Minister Mehdi Dakhlallah (a former journalist) publicly stated that Syrian newspapers were “unreadable,” pressured Syria's chief censor to resign, and called on journalists to insist on “freedom of expression” and to abandon “the vocabulary of confrontation.” Dakhlallah declared that Syrian media were in a transition from “dirigiste media” to “media with a purpose.”

Structural reforms in the plan include establishing a Syrian Media City in the outskirts of Damascus, allowing privately-owned Syrian satellite television channels to operate within restrictions, permitting privately-owned FM radio stations, and appointing an increasing number of women in key positions in the sector. The newly-appointed director of Syrian television, Diana Jabbour (a Christian woman and non-member of the Baath), announced that her mission was to “make the screen a bridge between citizens and the state.” Bolder steps have included allowing limited and controlled access to official newspapers by Syrian opposition writers—typically critics of corruption and not critics of the regime, the military, or the intelligence services.

While structural reform appears to be gaining steam, efforts to improve the screen image have been largely cosmetic—literally. In March, the six thousand employees of the Syrian Radio and Television Commission received a memorandum detailing “international criteria” for the physical appearance of television anchors, hosts, and presenters. Besides banning strong makeup for women, the guidelines stipulated that a television anchor's weight could not exceed the last two numbers of their height, so that a 160 centimeters tall newscaster could not weigh more than 60 kilograms. It is doubtful whether such changes will be sustainable, as they appear to be inspired by the Lebanese television channels (known for using women as visual attractors) rather than by the experience of Syrian television drama, whose success is based on artistic and policy innovation.

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