

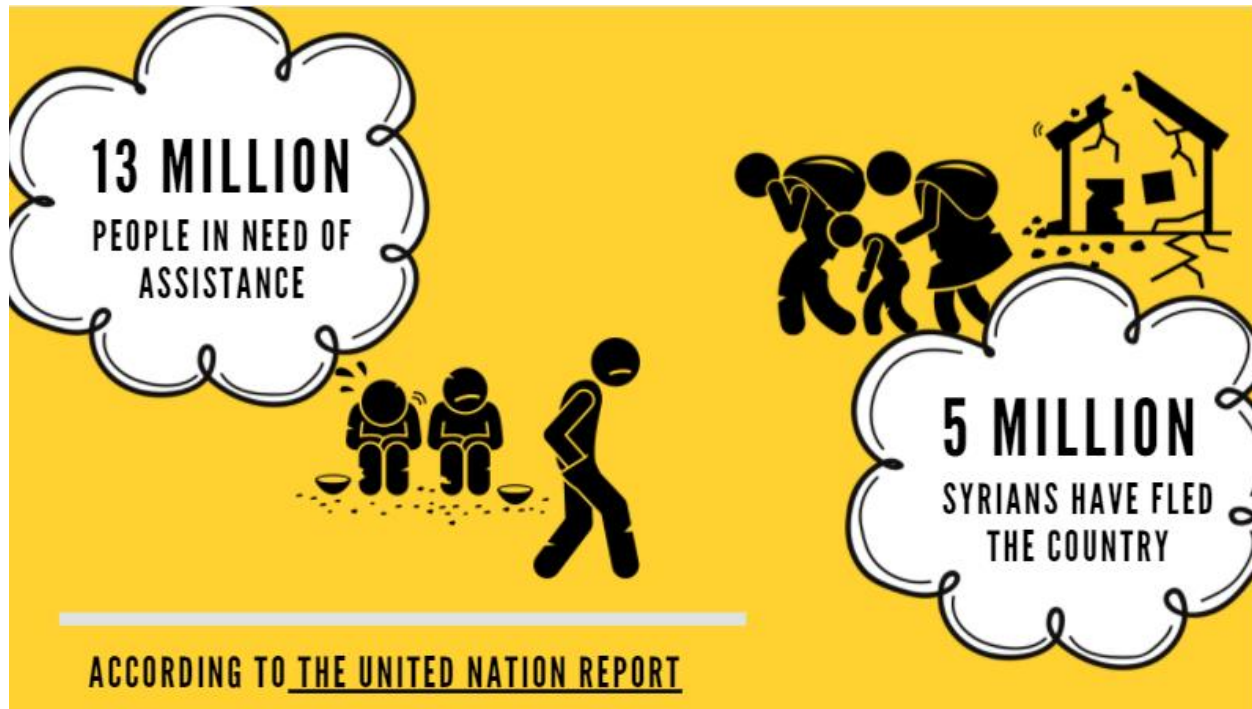


# SYRIAN CRISIS AND ITS COVERAGE

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The year 2011, was not like the previous years for Syrians; specifically, March of that year. As the security forces shoot protesters protesting in Deraa, while they were demanding the release of political prisoners. That incident caused a national unrest that kept escalating in the following months. From that date till now, Syrians have witnessed a massive destruction and displacement.



Over the years, the Syrian war turned into a complex conflict. The involvement of many foreign forces made it difficult to get the full and the accurate picture of the conflict. Countries are divided into two groups; if we can say that, the supporters and the opponents of the Syrian regime. Thus, the media coverage of the Syrian crisis varies depending on the media outlets' agenda and the degree to which they are able to cover the news closely.

In this paper, we are going to analyze four different international and regional media outlets: Russia Today, Al-Arabiya, The New York Times, and BBC; to understand the way they cover the Syrian Crisis.

Covering Syria in general haven't been that easy; especially, during war or conflict times. Due to the complex situation in Syria and the presence of foreign military intervention, media coverage became very limited. As each side of the conflict party either does not want any witnesses, that will let the masses know what is going on in the field or it would let them know what they want them to know only.

This approach led to media manipulation or weak media coverage, that does not show the full Image of what is happening on the Syrian grounds. Moreover, the Syrian government has restricted journalists from entering the country; and allowed only those who work in favor with the government.

For instance, [Russia Today](#), financed by the Russian Federation's budget, has more ability to cover a variety of topics in Syria; from political, social, and economical. According to Salam Musafir, head of the public and political programs department in RT, said over a phone call that "RT and Al-Mayadeen are the only media outlets that are allowed to operate in Syria." He continues "during the war, lots of media outlets got banned from entering Syria such as Al-Arabiya, Al-Jazeera, and even later on BBC". While RT has an office in Damascus with 2 roaming journalists or correspondents, who cover the news on spot. Sometimes, the main office in Moscow sends additional reporters to cover specific stories. As Musafir explained that "this advantage comes from the presence of the Russian army, and the ability to protect them".

However, RT's reporters face difficulties in getting authorizations in covering the northern parts of Syria. They, also, face high risks while covering on the grounds; as in 2017, RT lost its correspondent [Khaled Alkhateb](#), who was killed by an ISIS shell in Homs; as the RT stated. And this year, [Wafa Shabrouney](#), a correspondent for the RT Arabic was seriously injured by a blast, while filming "jihadists' ammo depot" in northwest Syria.

Moreover, although, their articles don't have to be sent to the Syrian media office for checking "it directly goes to the editor and gets published" and their point serves the Russian's interests, which support the Syrian regime, but the Syrian government still is not fully satisfied with RT's coverage. As Musafir emphasized that "this May, I had Firas Tlass (Syrian businessman against the regime), as a guest on my show (Qusara Al-kawl [قصارى القول](#)), but RT had to delete the interview as it did not meet its criteria."

Furthermore, through our research we have found that RT focuses on the Russian-Syrian relationship covering all the aspects that benefits them both. They rely on Syrian sources and cover stories that other international media outlets don't cover such as [the grain theft from Latakia's port](#) (source: Al-Baath Newspaper), [minor blasts](#) (source: Syrian TV), and frequent updates regarding [covid-19 cases](#).

On the other hand, other international or even regional media outlets don't have the direct control over its Syrian Crisis coverage. The Syrian government restrictions, made it difficult for the foreign media outlets to have their own reporters covering the conflict on the ground; Instead, they would have a stringer, who is a citizen from that country (citizen journalism), who covers for that media outlet. However, the stringer might not be always a reliable source, so media outlets would have to check the information that they get from that stringer and make sure that is accurate.

For example, Al-Arabiya, financed by Saudi Arabia and based in Dubai, has been banned from entering Syria and had to rely on stringers and other foreign media agencies. Al-Arabiya was banned as it had a clear agenda which does not support the Syrian government; Instead, it focuses on the news that mainly targets Iran and Turkey-Kurdish conflict in northern Syria. In addition, to the [Saudi-Syrian](#) relationship. Most of its news lacks the other point of views which makes it lack neutrality, although, it rely on other international news agencies such as [Reuters](#),

and [AFP](#) based in Beirut, but they quote the parts that they find it suitable and aids their target. Their material does not pass through the Syrian media office; thus, they follow their own agendas.

Many media outlets have their offices based in Beirut; although, AFP and Reuters had an office in Damascus, but due to the increased censorship over its news coverage after the Syrian war they moved to Beirut, alongside, the New York time.

As the situation in Syria started to escalate, the New York Times, an American media outlet, assigned Hwaida Saad, a Lebanese journalist, to report Lebanon and Syria. And since it is very hard for journalists to enter Syria legally as they need a permission from the authorities Saad operates from the office in Beirut; and said via email, that “we don’t have a team or office in Syria, we go when the Syrian government issues us visa only”. Thus they have to follow the authorization process; however, they have been able to connect and reach those who oppose the government through phone calls, and later on through Skype calls, which was before the government had a proper control over the internet. According to her she was able to get in touch with jihadists and other opponents. Her flexibility to reach out people within Syria through many ways, made her cover deep stories and that showed when we first approached her through twitter. She directly responded and provided us with her email.

This way of engagement shows in the news covered by the New York Times as they have exclusive stories written by the reporters based in Lebanon themselves. But of course, they also, rely on other news agencies; especially, in images as they don’t have their own photographer based in Syria.

When asked about covering the Syrian news Saad replied that “covering Syria has always been a challenge, the challenge of getting the visa in the Syrian government areas or the challenge to visit areas controlled by the opposition/armed groups in the northern part, or to go to the Kurdish controlled areas”. All these places need some logistic preparations that sometimes take a long time and it’s becoming more complicated with corona, said Saad. And their focus now, is on “corona and the economic situation that is badly affecting the majority from all classes”.

Their way of [coverage](#) shows that they aren’t supporters of the Syrian regime and they rely on telling the story from opponents’ side. Which might trigger the Syrian media office and its high censorship; although, New York Times publishes outside Syria, Saad stated that “The Syrian ministry of information already has their media office that is monitoring all the articles, including NY times articles; however, all our articles are online, and can easily have access to them”. They do sometimes receive some notes over some articles, which is the reason why the Syrian Government stopped giving them visas as it does not “like” their articles.

Regarding the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), financed by annual television licensing fees, has no office in Syria and After the conflict started BBC got banned too after a while. Although, the policy of reporting and presenting news at the BBC is characterized by transparency and impartiality to a large extent in dealing with global issues in a world dominated by severe differences in opinions and political convictions; However, in its Syrian coverage, according to [an article published by Arab News](#), BBC faced many charges over “biased” Syrian coverage supporting the government and its first source of information was (SANA). We tried to

contact the reporter Hanan Razek and Sam Farah, head of the BBC News Arabic to make sure of the information, but no response.

After our research, BBC focuses on the US, the European countries, Turkey and its relation to all what's happening in Syria, the refugees Crisis by interviewing some families or refugee families, and the migration crisis; such as the [US military presence in Syria](#) , [how Germany helped Syrian White Helmets ex-leader](#), and [how migration changed Europe](#). most of their sources rely on Syrian local news agency ([SANA](#)), stringers within Syria and other opposing point of views from foreign media agencies ([Anadolu news agency](#)) ([UN](#)) ([Reuters](#)) ([AFP](#)) and others. They also, rely on AFP and Getty for images, as they don't have their own photographer present in Syria. Their articles are full of data and background information that makes it reach and fulfilling; however, we found it difficult to know exactly who was the writer or in some cases it was not clear how they got the information.

Therefore, to conclude our findings, we chose the Russian Air Strike incident that happened recently on October 26 of this year, which was covered by these 4 media outlets; in order to compare and evaluate the differences between each outlet and the way they report.

Russia Today: [مقتل 35 على الأقل في ضربات جوية على معسكر للمعارضة السورية المسلحة](#) (covered in **Arabic Only**) source: **Reuters**

As RT supports the Russian regime, it needed a way to tell the news without accusing the Russians. So, in the title they did not mention "Russian Air Strikes" specifically, instead they generalized it. This approach makes the title not very catchy and vague. Moving on to the main body, they relied on the main article that was published by Reuters; however, they only quoted the information stated by the Syrian observatory for human rights based in London. The article states how many people were killed and where it happened, but they did not state who did that air strike. We've had a look on the [Reuters article](#) and it was clear that RT took the paragraphs that aided its purpose. While Reuters stated that it was a Russian air strike:

"The rebel source said suspected **Russian strikes** targeted the Failaq al-Sham faction in their base close to the border with Turkey, **killing 35 and injuring 50 others**. Many remained missing, the source said"

RT did not include the exact information provided by Reuters:

"وقال المصدر، إن الضربة استهدفت فصيل "فيلق الشام" في قاعدته القريبة من الحدود مع تركيا، مما أدى إلى **مقتل وإصابة العشرات**، وأن كثيرين ما زالوا في عداد المفقودين."

The article is very short, does not show their interest in the topic as it does not go into details and does not state background information.

Al-Arabiya: [Russian strike kills 78 Turkey-backed fighters in Syria's Idlib](#) Source: **AP**

For Al-Arabiya, its position is reflected within the article, since it is against the Syrian regime, then it won't be a supporter of Russia neither. As from the title it states who did the air strikes "Russian". Moving on to the body, it relied on the article published by [Associated Press](#) based in Beirut. It used indirect quotations paraphrasing some of the paragraphs that they took from the main article, based on their aim and message. For instance, in AP mentioned different point of views which were not present in Al-Arabiya article such as:

“The Russian state-funded news agency Sputnik said the Syrian air force was behind the strike. It called out Faylaq al-Sham as the largest Syrian group to dispatch fighters to foreign conflicts.”

And the Russian-Turkey conflict over Azerbaijan and Armenia and many other paragraphs; however, they focused on blaming Russians by adding a background information about the Russian-Turkish conflict in Idlib:

“In March, a fragile truce brokered between Moscow and Ankara stemmed a **deadly** months-long **Russia-backed regime military offensive** on the country’s last major rebel stronghold in Idlib that displaced almost a million people from their homes”.

and 2 more quotes stated by “The National Liberation Front, an umbrella group of Ankara-backed fighters (AFP)” and “NLF spokesman Sayf Raad”. These two sources, stresses on the point that Russians are to blame and they are violating the Russian-Turkish deal and causing troubles.

They end the article with a background information about the Syrian Crisis stating that it “has **killed** more than 380,000 people and **displaced** millions from their homes” which we might consider a weak ending that grasps emotions.

The New York Times: [\*Russian Airstrikes Kill Dozens of Turkish-Backed Rebels in Syria\*](#)

This article was written by Hwaida Saad and Carlotta Gall from Beirut and Azerbaijan. Their title is directly stating who/ what/ where/ How. Their article is different than the others as it had more exclusive details through special interviews or reaching out to stringers present in that area:

“killing dozens of **Syrian fighters** as well as **civilians harvesting olives** nearby, according to a **rebel spokesman**” **did not clarify why his name was not stated.**

Moving on to the body, similar information present in most of the articles, about how the presence of Faylaq Al Sham and how people have been displaced over the 9 years. Then, states the death toll stated by reports, but we don’t know which ones exactly (who conducted them?). it mentions the Russian-Turkish agreement and stated a background information about the conflict in Idlib; but the language was slant towards the Turkish:

“Russia mounted a **brutal offensive** with the Syrian government last winter to retake Idlib Province, the last rebel enclave in Syria. **Turkey intervened, deploying thousands of its own troops to support the rebel fighters** on the ground and **protect civilians** who started streaming toward the border.”

They also, added a background information about Faylaq Al-Sham, and quoted tweets of analysts regarding the incident, which we think is not the best source for an opposing or supporting view:

“Attacking the HQ of Faylaq al-Sham is nothing ordinary,” Omer Ozkizilcik, a researcher at SETA Foundation in the Turkish capital, Ankara, said in a **Twitter post.**”

It would have been a stronger source and more reliable if they contacted him directly via a phone call or video call. Regarding this, Saad stated that sometimes they miss small pieces that connects the article, so they rely on quick available sources that would hold the story together. She stressed that “it depends form story to another,” “how much time do we have, how important is it and how in depth should we go”.

BBC: [Syria war: 'Russian air strikes kill dozens' in Idlib](#)

The article covered by BBC and New York Times are similar in a way. They have similar Titles, same image taken by AFP photographer, and similar sources.

The BBC's article quotes the same source that Reuters used which is the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and stated that:

“The **assault** puts at risk a ceasefire in Idlib, brokered and monitored by Russia and Turkey, which back opposite sides in the war.”

It did not reinforce who did the air strike, so it won't blame one side on the other and which makes the language informative and balanced.

In some parts there was a vagueness in the source similar to New York Times, it's not clear which reports:

“Russian air strikes in northern Syria have killed more than 50 Turkish-backed **militia** fighters in the mainly rebel-held province of Idlib, **reports say**.”

“When the ceasefire was announced, **Turkey said** (to whom or where?) it reserved the right to "retaliate with all its strength" against any attack by forces allied to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.”

They did not add any additional information, other than the ending which was a background information about Idlib in a neutral way, as it does not state beaten by who:

“Idlib is the last province held by rebels and jihadists, **who have been beaten back in a nine-year-long civil war**.”

BBC is recognized by its data visualization. Thus they included a map showing Idlib province and other Syrian provinces specifying each area under which forces it is controlled.



In conclusion, although we have a sufficient amount of the Syrian crisis coverage; however, its media restrictions weaken the accuracy. As most foreign media outlets depend on stringers, who might not be very reliable. For instance, in the above four articles, each article stated different death and injury toll, some sources said “the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights put the number of **dead at 78**”, others “early reports put the toll at **34 dead and 70 wounded**, but the death toll quickly **rose to 60** with **news of civilians** killed outside the camp”, or even “Russian warplanes also **wounded 90** more”. These small inaccurate data leads to misleading information and wrong assumptions made by the reader.

## Sources:

**All the sources are linked to the website (hyperlinks)**

**First graphic generated by us.**

### **Interviews:**

- Russia Today- Salam Musafir: +79169039962
- The New York Times- Hwaida Saad: [Hwaida.saad@nytimes.com](mailto:Hwaida.saad@nytimes.com)
- BBC- Hanan Razek & Sam Farah: did not respond through social media.