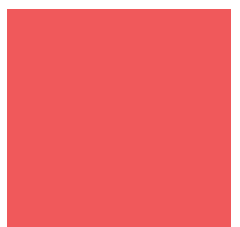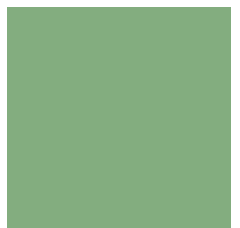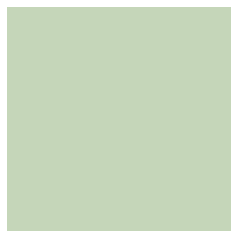# Syria Audience Research 2016

Qualitative Analysis

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study builds on the 2016 Syria audience survey by exploring in-depth certain questions using focus groups with 48 Syrian nationals from various sides of the political divide, categorized into pro-government, politically neutral, and pro-opposition individuals. The focus groups included fifteen open-ended questions that assessed the following five areas:

- Syrian audiences' assessment of the performance of Syrian, Arab and international media;
- Syrian audiences' access and selection criteria for news sources;
- Syrian audiences' evaluation of the role of national, Arab and international media in exacerbating and/or alleviating the conflict;
- the most important information needs of Syrian audiences; and their assessment of the level of media literacy of the Syrian public in general and of their own.

The results pointed out that Syrians overall have a gloomy view of their media landscape—whether local, regional or international—and believe that most news media played a negative role in the conflict, exacerbating the division and normalizing the violence and hate. They are dissatisfied with the information they receive and believe that most news media offer an excessive amount of political news and an insufficient amount of information that addresses their mundane daily needs, such as news related to basic health care, official logistical and administrative procedures, supplementary education, basic business and economic information, as well as background information to the political news already being covered and reliable statistics and research about the various industries and the economic situation in the country.

Syrians state that the speed of delivery and credibility are the two most important criteria for selecting their news, followed by comprehensiveness of coverage and, at a distant last, objectivity. While they value digital, social and mobile media for their speed, they tend to prefer traditional media for their comprehensiveness. When a handful of emerging media outlets offered a combination of speed, credibility and comprehensiveness in addition to focusing on the local news, mundane information and daily needs of Syrians, these outlets won audiences from various sides of the political spectrum, including non-partisans.

Nevertheless, Syrians remain deeply divided along political line in their views and subscriptions to media sources and reflect low levels of media literacy. Pro-government Syrians tend to follow pro-government media, mainly criticize pro-opposition media, and justify the failures of pro-government media, while pro-opposition Syrians do the opposite. However, both sides when critiquing the failures of the media they sympathize with mainly refer to the failures of these media to effectively support their sides and help them win the conflict. The Syrians who tend to be neutral/apolitical shun all partisan media but highlighted the same emerging media operations that mainly addressed their daily needs and provided them with non-political information.

INTRODUCTION

To complement the findings of the 2016 Syria audience survey and further explore some questions, qualitative research in the form of focus groups with Syrian nationals were conducted. In addition to delving into in-depth information, an inherent advantage of qualitative research methods, this study has the advantage of comparing the perceptions, opinions and views of Syrians from various sides of the political divide, a matter not possible in the survey due to the risks attached to asking people in the field about their political affiliations. Hence, a total of 48 participants, which included pro-government, politically neutral, and pro-opposition individuals participated in this study. The focus groups moderator guide included fifteen open-ended semi-structured questions and attempted to assess the media literacy levels of Syrian nationals through five key research questions:

1. How do Syrian nationals from various sides of the political spectrum assess the performance of Syrian, Arab and international media with regards to the ongoing conflict?

2. How do Syrian nationals access and select the news sources they follow?

3. How do Syrian nationals evaluate the role of national, Arab and international media in exacerbating and/or alleviating the conflict in Syria?

4. What are the most important information needs of Syrian nationals and has the current media environment sufficiently satisfied such needs?

5. How do Syrian nationals assess the level of media literacy of the Syrian public in general and of their own?

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative scientific method of focus groups is used to gather in-depth information and better understand nuanced issues and meaning making, a matter not possible through quantitative methods, such as surveys. The nine focus groups conducted for this study built on the recently completed survey of 1708 Syrian nationals. The focus groups were conducted between June and July 2016 and included 48 participants (36 males and 12 females). Three focus groups were conducted in Lebanon and six in Turkey. Participants came from various Syrian regions and included government supporters, opposition supporters, and politically neutral nationals, although the latter were also diverse in their political views, as some of them were leaning towards supporting the opposition and other towards supporting the government, and yet some were largely apolitical (see Appendix A for details).

Focus groups normally use non-random purposive sampling techniques with the aim of including a sample that is representative of the issue being studied, rather than a nationally representative sample, such as the one surveys aim to pursue. Researchers strove to recruit a diverse sample of Syrian nationals that represented various political orientations. Capitalizing on the researchers' network of Syrian nationals, a snowball sampling approach was adopted with various entry points. Field researchers who carried out the surveys were asked to help in recruiting people from their regions and were given explicit criteria for selection. The field researchers who came from areas predominantly controlled by the Syrian government were asked to recruit Syrians proactively and openly supportive of the government, while researchers who came from areas controlled by the opposition were asked to do the same for Syrians proactively and openly supportive of the opposition. Researchers from both areas were also asked to recruit people who are openly neutral and not supportive of either side. In the first step, and once an "entry point" individual was identified, the field researcher discussed his/her name with the primary investigator. After the primary investigator confirmed the selection, the field researcher used the snowballing method to ask the "entry point" individual to point them to someone with the same political leaning who may be interested in participating in the research. While the pro-opposition and pro-government participants were more easily identifiable, it was difficult to pin-point neutral participants, and some of these were leaning in one direction or the other, but were not openly or proactively supportive of one side.

Each field researcher committed to recruit five participants, and a total number of 100 potential participants was obtained. From this sample, 68 participants accepted to participate, but only 48 ended up making it to the focus group meetings. Because conducting focus groups inside Syria was dangerous to both researchers and participants, the meetings took place in Lebanon and Turkey. Most recruits were transported to Lebanon and Turkey for the purpose of safely and freely participating in the study. Some participants in Turkey had recently moved to reside there. Unfortunately, several planned focus groups had to be cancelled or rescheduled. Some participants were not allowed passage at the Lebanese border, and some scheduled focus groups near Gaziantep, Turkey, were cancelled due to a sudden rise in violence and assassinations in that area, where many Syrians temporarily reside.

The focus groups were all conducted in Arabic by two professional moderators and followed the same moderator outline (see Appendix B). The focus group questions expanded on the major issues revealed by the surveys in order to obtain nuanced information, and were guided by the research questions stated above. The moderator outline included 15 open-ended questions (Appendix B).

The meetings lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and were all recorded and later transcribed and analyzed. After data cleaning and organization, researchers used an inductive analysis technique to "identify salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief."[1]

Researchers faced some limitations, including the issues mentioned above about participants not being able to reach the meetings. In addition, some participants at first were suspicious about the purpose of the study and it took them a while to feel comfortable answering the questions openly. It was difficult to recruit additional women to ensure gender representation parity, as many of those who declined participation, due to the requirement of making the trip to Lebanon or Turkey, were women. Finally, it is possible that the presence of one pro-opposition participant in focus group 1, which was predominantly made up of pro-government participants (see Appendix A), may have unintentionally inhibited that participant from being fully open in stating her opinion. The moderators did their utmost to keep the conversations calm and rational and to allow each participant equal and fair time to speak by following standard focus group methodology guidelines.

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1   Marshall, C. and Rossman, G.B. (1999). Designing Qualitative Research. 3rd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. p. 154.

FINDINGS

This section details the findings of the focus groups and is divided according to the five research questions stated above.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do Syrian nationals from various sides of the political spectrum assess the performance of Syrian, Arab and international media with regards to the ongoing conflict?

This research question is divided into four sections. The first deals with (RQ1-a) Syrian media, followed by (RQ1-b) Arab/regional media and then (RQ1-c) international media. The last covers (RQ1-d) new media.

FINDINGS SUMMARY FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 1

- When it came to local Syrian media, Syrians clearly distinguished between pro-government and pro-opposition media.
- Syrians are divided along political lines in following local Syrian media and assessing their performance.
- While partisan Syrians (pro-government and pro-opposition Syrians) had a negative view of local Syrian media channels that contradict their political affiliations, neutral Syrians tended to be critical of all local Syrian media.
- Syrian audiences, regardless of their political affiliation, had an overall negative perception of Arab media, especially regarding their role in inciting Syrians.
- Syrian audiences, regardless of their political affiliation, had an overall positive perception of international media, especially their role in providing professional and objective news, but most rarely followed these media.
- When it came to new media, Syrian audiences appreciated what they had to offer in speed, access and diversity of information but questioned the credibility and trustworthiness of their content.

RQ1-a: Syrian Media

In assessing Syrian media, participants across all focus groups clearly distinguish between pro-government media and pro-opposition (or "pro-revolution") media. In line with the findings of the survey, there is a strong relationship between the political affiliation of Syrian participants and their assessment of the performance of these two media alignments. The findings again draw the picture of a deeply divided and partisan audience. Nevertheless, the findings also highlight the presence of a neutral non-partisan group that has a harsh view of both pro-government and pro-opposition media.

Pro-government participants defended the government-controlled media, and while admitting an initial weakness in handling the situation when the protests broke out, most of them mentioned a noticeable improvement in the quality of this media coverage in subsequent years. Even when criticizing the performance of pro-government media at the start of the protests—specifically how pro-government media excluded other opinions and voices and played down news about the protests—such actions were described as professional failures and well-intentioned errors because journalists were caught by surprise and were trying to serve the country. One pro-government participants even noted that "more recently, local media was alerted to this failure [that they are not covering the other opinions] and started giving space to opposing voices, but in the first place, local media were presenting the voices that served the

country and excluding the other destructive voices." It is important to highlight that this group's criticism of the initial weakness of pro-government media referred mainly to their inability to serve the government view effectively and to their weak technical quality. In fact, the harshest criticism from one pro-government participant characterized the Syrian media as very weak because it was incapable of stopping "foreign media from falsifying stories and misrepresenting events," especially at the start of the conflict. Most acknowledged an initial "surprise and confusion" phase, where the government-controlled media offered a dismal performance and at certain points made embarrassing mistakes. However, the majority in this group still praised the pro-government media for maintaining a strong and consistent political stance throughout the conflict. Several participants blamed the initial weak performance on the absence of technical capabilities and talent. One participant explained, "It was weak in all aspects: coverage, production, cadres, communication of the information, scripts, etc. But now it improved a bit." A positive step, according to one participant, was the introduction of military action coverage, which allowed the pro-government media to regain audiences it had lost due to its initial attempt to hide and ignore events taking place on the ground, especially in opposition-controlled areas — a matter justified by some pro-government participants and timidly criticized by others. One participant noted, "logically, the government media will speak in the name of the state, but it made a mistake by not at least alluding to events occurring in opposition zones." Another participant justified the absence of the other points of view, noting that the "national media should be at the service of the nation." One participant even defended such coverage as "truthful," a term almost exclusively used by pro-government participants. "Initially, the national media showed the opinion that serves the country. As for the other destructive point of view, it was indeed marginalized... [The Syrian media] changed some facts, some numbers, but this does not mean truthfulness was absent." All other participants considered no media, regardless of its affiliation, to be truthful, but this latter point of view highlights the extreme partisan state of at least some members of the Syrian audience, especially those who support the government. Interestingly, this same group barely mentioned the opposition media — as if it almost didn't exist, and when probed about it, most said they didn't follow it at all and used negative terms to describe it. For example, several participants directly or indirectly viewed the opposition media as primarily responsible to inciting Syrians to fight. One participant added that opposition media "always portrays the other side (opposition) as the victim." In sum, pro-government supporters mainly followed and trusted pro-government media and ignored and shunned opposition media. They admitted some (albeit justified) failures of the pro-government media at the start of the conflict, especially in terms of not being able to counter the opposition media and not being inclusive in their coverage, but such failures, according to them, were rectified later with more inclusive coverage that also served the country better.

While pro-government audiences largely ignored commenting on pro-opposition media, the pro-opposition participants severely criticized the government-controlled media, simultaneously acknowledging the success of its strategy. And far from praising the opposition media, this group also criticized its performance, pointing to its failures and limits to effectively support the revolution. So, just as pro-government audiences criticized the ineffectiveness of pro-government media to support the government's political interests, their pro-opposition counterparts criticized the pro-opposition media for failing to support the political interests of the opposition. Nevertheless, the pro-opposition participants displayed more diverse opinions than their pro-government counterparts. Although all fiercely attacked the pro-government media, describing it as closed, strict, untruthful, non-influential, deceiving and aimed only at mobilization, some participants admitted the success of its strategy of sticking to one story line. One participant noted "the regime succeeded to a certain extent in mastering its media policy and orienting it in the direction that serves its interest. It maintained a unique pattern and story line on all affiliated platforms. It is a shameful strategy." Another participant noted that this strategy was so successful that it induced some opposition media to use pro-government terminology. The performance of the pro-opposition media also received significant criticism from this group. Many deemed pro-opposition media as lacking awareness and experience in politics. Others considered such media to be divided and serving different opposition factions. One participant noted that pro-opposition media went from "a revolution media to a sectarian and Islamic media, and the different outlets criticize each other instead of uniting all against the regime." Another participant said that the opposition media did not give a positive image of the revolution and did not leave any imprint regionally or internationally. Like most pro-government participants, many pro-opposition participants also noted that the pro-opposition media have recently improved. As evidence to this improvement, they point out to how international media agencies increasingly relay their coverage. One participant said that pro-opposition media "was born during the revolution, and even if it can be criticized for being completely biased in favor of the revolution and still missing professionalism, in the end, I think these media constitute a unique source and all international agencies rely on it." Several

others pointed out how the pro-opposition media "acquired credibility with international agencies and with regime opponents." Others attributed failure and poor performance to the conditions imposed by external funders and to the conflict circumstances. In a nutshell, pro-opposition participants like pro-government participants justified any initial failures of the pro-opposition media, particularly in serving the revolution's cause — not in terms of serving to inform the public. They criticized the pro-opposition media for being divided, inexperienced and largely ineffective in countering pro-government media until recently when international media increasingly carried their coverage, but they had harsher criticism for the pro-government media, which they saw as deceptive, untruthful and only interested in mobilizing supporters — a matter that they succeeded in doing, according to this group.

The politically neutral participants were the most critical towards both pro-government and pro-opposition media. Those living in the government-controlled areas had an even harsher stance against the pro-government media. The dominant position among the politically neutral participants condemns media of both political orientations, accusing them of being extremely biased and unprofessional, propagating inflammatory content, and disconnected from people's daily lives and needs. One participant drew the picture concisely: right after the war started, "the room was left for unprofessional, nonobjective, and inciting messages directed at the other party, and after five years of conflict, the intensity of the media war is even higher. Anything is allowed, as long as it justifies the end." Simultaneously, this neutral crowd saw the Syrian media as ineffective and reactionary. They deny or ignore realities on the ground and persistently try to win people's support, but have been constantly losing audiences due to their nonprofessional behavior and dishonesty. Other participants criticized the Syrian media, especially pro-government media, as being dissociated from the citizens' reality. "When watching TV channels, you feel as if the citizen is living in total welfare. This for me is a bigger problem than the issue of a channel's bias or support of one group or another." Others lamented the lack of clear strategy and direction, especially in regards to bringing the divided Syrian people back together. "There are no reconciliation messages [from the media of both sides] that help in the rapprochement of points of view," commented one participant. Another noted, "every media institution present in Syria is reactionary. They possess no strategy and are unable to create a plan that can shape the public opinion." The same participant argued that, as a result, Syrian media failed to prevent the exploitation of events by the foreign media. Three media outlets were cited by many neutral participants as exceptions to the general situation: the two radio channels Sham FM and Al Madina, and the website Yomyat Kzefeh Hawen. Participants saw them as more trusted and influential and closer to the social realities of Syrian citizens. "They are more concerned about people's daily needs and realities and less about political propaganda," noted one participant, an opinion that resonated with almost all neutral participants and even some partisan participants. Overall, politically neutral participants had the harshest criticism for both pro-government and pro-opposition media and were turned off by their messages, describing them as biased, unprofessional, propagandistic, inflammatory, and more importantly disconnected from people's realities and needs.

RQ1-b: Arab Media
When discussing the coverage of Arab media, participants had a largely negative outlook towards these outlets. They also seemed to lump all Arab media together as one and rarely offered explicit differentiation between Arab media that supported the government and those that supported the opposition. The reason for this view, however, is not necessarily because audiences saw all Arab media as one, but rather because participants followed one group of Arab media or another (either pro-government or pro-opposition) and rarely watched both, or simply did not follow any Arab media. For instance, there was a total absence of references to pro-government Arab media by pro-opposition participants, as if they did not exist. This matter was also illustrated by some participants' remarks, such as the following made by a pro-government supporter: "I stopped watching al-Jazeera after it turned into a propaganda machine." This again reconfirms the findings of the survey that drew a picture of a deeply divided and partisan Syrian audience that mainly followed media outlets that resonate with their beliefs. Nevertheless, many Syrian participants regardless of their political affiliation had some common views about Arab media. One opinion was dominantly clear: almost all participants noted that the coverage of Arab media outlets was closely tied to the political agenda of the country to which they are affiliated. Most participants saw this as a negative matter and indicated that the biased and politicized coverage of Arab media was dictated by political priorities of their governments towards Syria rather than by professional journalistic values — an opinion that spanned the various affiliations of the participants. Simultaneously, many participants claimed they can predict how each Arab media outlet will cover issues. "Arab media are divided, and it is very easy to know what will and will not be said by each channel."

Some views were indeed divided along political affiliations. On one hand, pro-opposition participants lamented the deterioration of Arab media coverage "after the positive support they offered to the revolution at the beginning." One pro-opposition participant noted, "Most Arab media at the beginning supported the revolution in its objectives and peaceful goals… but later they turned into one of the tools of the Syrian conflict." Several other pro-opposition participants noted that Arab media are now more focused on attacking ISIS and supporting some Islamic groups, such as Al-Qaeda, and have abandoned the opposition's original cause. On the other hand, many pro-government participants criticized harshly the initial anti-government one-sided coverage of most Arab media outlets. "At the beginning of the conflict the Arab media adopted a very harsh approach against the government, but when it lost hope of achieving any political aims through mobilization, it softened its coverage. Now the coverage is in major part oriented towards ISIS." Along the same lines, one pro-government participant dismissed Arab media because "it did not want to admit the presence of terrorism in Syria," while another accused Arab media of exploiting the weaknesses of the Syrian media and falsifying events. As for neutral Syrian participants, most reproached Arab media for acting like the Syrian media in taking sides in the conflict and widening the gap between the opposition and the government, instead of working on reconciliation.

The one opinion that seemed to unify pro-government, pro-opposition and neutral participants was that all these negative matters led to Arab media losing many audiences after their initial success in attracting many Syrians. There were few positive comments towards Arab media. Some participants praised them for their "closeness to Syrian people's concern," while other admired their superior technical abilities and new journalistic methods, such as "the use of data, maps and detailed explanations of what's happening on the ground." One participant noted, "the Arab media won many Syrians because they were well-funded and were closer to people." Al-Jazeera was the most mentioned outlet during the discussion of Arab media. While the number of mentions constitutes an indicator of the influence of the channel, it was viewed negatively by the majority of participants from all affiliations. Many accused it of being politically affiliated, changing strategies according to its sponsor, the Qatari government, or supporting Al-Qaeda. Only one person made a positive comment, considering that Al-Jazeera dedicated a lot of coverage to the humanitarian dimension of the conflict. Finally, only one participant made a clear distinction between different types of Arab media. According to this neutral and well informed Syrian, the Arab media included two types of outlets: The first one is the "strategy-based type, such as BBC Arabic," which offered a good performance. The second was solely transmitting sectarian inciting content. These predominantly were channels founded and established during the conflict period, such as Al-Wisal and Souria al-Thawra, according to this participant.

RQ1-c: International Media

Like their perception of Arab media, Syrian participants tended to lump all international media as one. However, unlike their predominantly negative view towards Arab media, Syrian audiences had a largely positive view towards international media, especially in regards to its professionalism and objectivity, but not necessarily in terms of offering news that serves the Syrian public. It is important here to highlight that most participants, regardless of affiliation, rarely ever followed international media and those who did tended to have a broad and indifferent view about them. This again reconfirms the survey data that showed international media to barely register in the daily digest of Syrian audiences. Unlike their opinion on Arab media, only few participants alluded to the influence of foreign countries' political agendas on the coverage of their media. The criticism towards international media dealt mainly with the insufficient attention given to the Syrian conflict, the overemphasis of events that offered good stories and visuals, and the focus on topics that are priorities for these outlets' countries. Many participants lamented that the Syrian conflict doesn't feature high on the priority list of international media. "What is happening in Syria does not necessarily interest the West, and every media channel looks at the topic from the perspective that concerns it," noted one participant. "For the foreign media, we are an event they address whenever we offer a good story, but when they have their own good stories, they forget about us. We do not mean anything to them," another lamented. These opinions also translated to the angle and focus of the coverage. One participant noted that most international media have recently become obsessed with the topics related to "fighting terrorism, ISIS and Islamic radicalization, matters that affect many European countries." Another explained, international media are more interested by visual and sensational content that offer attractive stories, but might not always reflect the big picture. Along these lines, many participants mentioned the relentless coverage of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy who drowned on September 2, 2015. A photo of his body lying on a Turkish beach was widely published around the world. Several participants noted that soon after his tragic death, international media moved on to other attractive stories. In addition to such insufficient and episodic coverage, many participants also noted that international media coverage

lacked in depth and focused on news angles related to their countries' priorities. As one participant put it, "every country focuses on what concerns it. The USA is interested in ISIS, while the UK is anxious about the refugees." Some justified this coverage due to the complex situation in Syria. One participant noted that most international media "were doing the right thing, but the complicated situation in Syria does not help." Another participant highlighted the fact that international media are not highly followed due to "language barriers," which relegates international media to the third place, after Syrian and Arab media. Even the few participants who criticized international media for being affiliated with countries that had political agendas in Syria were quite mild in their criticism. "International media, despite being sponsored by states conspiring against Syria, showed positive and negative realities of both sides." Most of these negative comments towards international media also included that over time the coverage became more objective. According to one participant, "most international media supported the opposition at the start of the conflict, but later it balanced the coverage between the two sides."

RQ1-d: New Media

When asked to compare traditional media (newspapers, radio, and TV) and new media (online, social and mobile), Syrian participants were quite unified across the political divide. Overall, they saw that new media offered speed, access and diversity of information but its credibility and trustworthiness were largely in question. Almost all participants recognized the new media's speed in delivering news compared to the traditional media, but all also questioned its reliability and truthfulness. Many participants considered it to be very biased, chaotic, untruthful and more prone to carry fabricated news and rumors. Many gave various examples of YouTube videos and photos that turned out to be inaccurately identified, doctored, or outright fabricated. "Both traditional and new media lack truthfulness, but the new media are more dangerous because the news spreads faster, which means false news also spreads faster," noted one participant. Nevertheless, some participants also recognized a recent improvement in new media content, especially by newly established institutions that focused on people's daily needs, rather than political propaganda. "New and social media were weak at the beginning of the conflict, but they have come a long way since then." This group largely agreed that "the improvement is noted for both sides," especially in offering detailed, local and "small news," which is not seen on TV "because this news is not considered prominent enough by traditional media." For example, several participants mentioned the positive role of the website Yomyat Kzefeh Hawen, which also featured prominently in the audience survey. Considered by some to be neutral and by others to be pro-government leaning — due to the fact that its operation is mainly within government-controlled Damascus, Yomyat Kzefeh Hawen started as a Facebook page and offered documentation of mortar attacks and other events of the conflict without explicitly taking sides. Later it expanded its team of citizen journalists to cover most of the country and offered more information relevant to the daily lives of citizens and their pressing and immediate needs. Lately, its popularity skyrocketed, attracting hundreds of thousands of followers from various sides of the conflict. A third group of participants tended to see new media as an extension to the traditional media and consequently suffering from the same problems, if not more. This group criticized both traditional and new media for neglecting the humanitarian dimension. Moreover, they particularly blamed social media for having accustomed people to violent content, so much that the public became indifferent to the horrors of war.

FINDINGS SUMMARY FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 2

- For pro-government and neutral Syrians, the top criteria for selecting news are: speed, credibility, coverage of both sides, and objectivity—a distant fourth.
- For most pro-opposition Syrians, the criteria for selecting news was simply following trusted persons, especially online.

When it comes to selecting news sources, four criteria emerged as dominant among participants, especially government supporters and neutral participants. First, speed of news delivery was the top criterion followed closely by credibility of the source. Most participants highlighted the need to know immediately when something happens but also tied that need to the trustworthiness and credibility of the source of information. "I get online news via mobile because it is the fastest, and you immediately find the news you need without having to watch a whole newscast." Next, many participants said they tended to favor sources that covered both sides of the conflict and offered realistic coverage, what many referred to as "news that is close to reality." The fourth and final criterion mentioned by only a few was objectivity. While pro-government and neutral participants were largely consistent in mentioning these four criteria, many pro-opposition participants departed from this trend and highlighted a different criterion: following trusted persons. Being part of a network of activists working on the Syrian issue, their news sources were the activists themselves, often in the form of individual social media accounts. One participants noted, "For news about ISIS, I seek foreign newspapers, but the first source for local news are the activists." Therefore, the news sources, especially local news sources, are not represented by an institution, but rather by personal and trusted connections, and therefore the criterion in this case becomes the affiliation of the individual to a certain political group. Regardless of their political affiliation, some well-informed participants noted that they first go to social media to get the breaking news quickly and then access traditional media for details and analysis. "I first receive the news from social media... Social media is fast, but the details are on TV talk-shows and newspapers."

FINDINGS SUMMARY FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 3

- Overall, Syrians believe that media in general exacerbated the conflict and played a negative role by provoking hatred, sectarianism, and violence.
- When it came to the question which media played the worst role in exacerbating the conflict, pro-government Syrians mainly blamed pro-opposition Syrian and Arab media and to a lesser extent pro-opposition international media, while pro-opposition Syrians mainly blamed Syrian pro-government media and to a lesser extent pro-Syrian government Arab and international media.
- Unlike government supporters, some opposition supporters also blamed pro-opposition media for exacerbating the situation, especially in how they were divided and provoked conflict within the opposition camp.

Syrian participants of all political orientations agreed that the media in general played a major role in exacerbating the conflict, but their opinions diverged when it came to which type of media played the worst role in the conflict. Almost all participants believed that the media provoked hatred, sectarianism, and violence. However, different political sides blamed different media for this incitement. Government supporters tended to blame Syrian pro-opposition, Arab and international media, especially the former. As for pro-opposition participants, pro-government media were the main culprit but also blamed Arab and international media that supported the Syrian government. Nevertheless, unlike government supporters, some opposition supporters also blamed pro-opposition media for playing a role in the incitement, for instance, by exaggerating the numbers of victims and normalizing violent and graphic content. One pro-opposition participant justified this behavior saying, "we might have resorted to incitement, but this was a reaction to the lies propagated by the regime." Another noted, "The opposition media contributed very much to fueling the conflict and not to the strengthening of the revolution, by accustoming the viewer to violent and bloody photos." A third explained, "They thought exaggerating the number of victims will serve the cause and speed the regime's fall." But many pro-opposition supporters also noted that after realizing the conflict will not end soon and that no side will win the conflict at the expense of the other, the opposition softened its media tone and is now in search for reconciliation. Other pro-opposition participants blamed the division of the opposition media, which led to incitement not only against the government but also against other opposition groups. Politically neutral participants blame all media, local, Arab and international, from both sides. "Whether national, Arab or international, maximum incitement occurred. The truth is that at the beginning, no harm was done. The protesters did not harm as was shown in governmental media, neither did the army harm as shown in opposition media. But because of the media's misrepresentation and incitement, there was no room left for understanding." This group also differentiated between the role of new and traditional media. While the latter had an agenda that aimed at provoking hatred, the former played a role in disseminating false information and fabricated content. In a sense politically neutral participants believed that the actual events on the ground incited people, and most media were only reflecting these events. "Incitement came from some media when they were communicating false information, but in most cases the news was truthful." Very few participants believed the media played a positive role. One opposition supporter said the media played a crucial role in informing Syrians of the events happening in their country and constituted a tool by which Syrians made their voices heard. Another opposition supporter believed the media were victims of this war. "The media neither incited hatred nor played a positive role. When the conflict turned into a war, the media lost their orientation and were lost in the details and the mistakes of the opposition instead of keeping their focus on the cause." Two neutral participants pointed to the positive role the media played through its covering of humanitarian issues, although admitting that the same media outlets were inciting hatred.

FINDINGS SUMMARY FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 4

- Most Syrians agree that the media offer a surplus of information about political and military events, but do not provide sufficient information that affect regular citizens on a daily basis.
- Syrians lack information that relates to prosaic matters and daily needs, including health information, official logistical and administrative information, educational information, economic and business information, background information and studies and statistical information.

Consistently with the survey findings, most participants agreed that the media have sufficiently covered political and military events, but have not satisfactorily offered badly needed information that affect citizens on a daily basis. Also, like the survey, most suggested information needs that are lacking tend to relate to prosaic matters, but a significant number of participants also requested improvements to the manner in which existing information is being delivered. These can be divided into the following:

Health information: Many participants noted that there is a lack of sufficient coverage of health matters, including providing information about first aid and dealing with war-related injuries. Others noted that the public needs to be better alerted about breakouts in certain diseases and shortages of some medications. "The health topic is neglected by journalists, despite serious problems in the sector, but no light is shed on it."

Official logistical and administrative information: Many participants also noted the need for information about how to process certain government-related matters during these irregular times, such as getting a passport or identification card, requesting certain public works to be fixed, acquiring certain license, etc.

Educational information: Because many schools have been shut down and many young Syrians have not been able to get an education, participants suggested that the various media try to make up for that gap by providing basic educational content. In addition, several participants noted the need to educate about human rights and freedom of expression, and to cover humanitarian issues because the public has become oblivious to others' suffering.

Economic and business information: Some participants noted that the economic situation in the country is not being sufficiently covered and providing information about running businesses and different strategies during war times would be helpful.

Background information: As noted earlier, many participants believed that the information provided by the media needs to be improved. One common request was the providing of background information about the formation of the myriad of factions participating in the Syrian conflict, their goals, and their alliances. "We suddenly hear about a new group fighting somewhere and we are not given any information or history about that group," one participant lamented. Information from the field and from regular people's suffering was another request. One participant noted that such information is critical for Syrians to see the big picture of the war. Finally, a handful of participants noted the need of investigative reporting to tackle some topics such as political corruption.

Studies and statistical information: Also, a few participants highlighted the need for reliable research and statistics. "The government hides a great deal of its statistics and makes it difficult to obtain... We need studies, research and precise surveys from the media and other sectors." Other suggestions related to providing more current demographic information and data about economic losses incurred by various agricultural and industrial sectors.

These comments bring to the fore the increasing popularity of a handful of emerging media operations that decided to offer, instead of additional political coverage, a high dose of daily, mundane, practical news that touches every Syrian individual's life, such as Yomyat Kzefeh Hawen, which was mentioned earlier.

FINDINGS SUMMARY FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 5

- Syrians agree that the level of media literacy levels in Syria is low and that strengthening media literacy in the country can have a positive effect on the conflict, especially in terms of protecting people from misleading information and adding more voices to the national discussion.
- The analysis of participants' responses confirms the notion that most Syrians have a weak understanding of media literacy and that they themselves have low media literacy levels.

Media and digital literacy as a broad theoretical framework deals with the ability of individuals to critically evaluate, analyze and assess media content and processes, and to place the content and processes within their political, economic, cultural, technological, and institutional contexts and limitations. This includes the ability to understand and pinpoint propaganda tactics, to recognize when their media networks and information diets are limited to like-minded people and content that reconfirms their existing beliefs, to deftly identify the problems and harmful content in the media they support and likewise identify the helpful and beneficial content in the media they oppose. Media literacy also focuses on citizens' capacity to utilize media tools, methods, and systems to express their opinions, defend their convictions, engage in local, national and global discussions, and counter media messages and narratives that they find harmful to their interests, beliefs, values and societies or to that of others who are oppressed. In the past two decades research to media and digital literacy has grown in scope to cover many more important areas that affect human communication and culture, including participatory culture, counter narratives, negotiating communication spaces, re-purposing of media content, civic media, etc. Unfortunately, the current study finds that media literacy among Syrians remains lacking even at its basic level.

All participants agreed that media literacy levels among Syrians are extremely low, and all except one participant agreed that media literacy is essential and can play a positive role in the Syrian conflict by protecting people from being misled and by adding more voices to the national discussion. Most participants noted that the education system does not include media literacy instruction — with the exception of a recently added media literacy course offered at Damascus University. However, some participants noted that five years of war and constant exposure to propaganda and fabricated content has brought the media literacy levels up. "By constantly watching media through these five years of conflict, the Syrian public acquired some understanding of the media and how they work. People have become more knowledgeable about agendas and news falsification. They do not take all news for granted, and consult various sources." In addition, some participants agreed that whatever little media literacy levels exist among the Syrian public are limited to critical assessment of the media they consume, but do not extend to sophisticated analysis and production and re-purposing of content. "On accessing information and discovering its accuracy, extent of exaggeration, or understatement, many people now have high levels of awareness. Our problem is in the analysis and re-use of such information." Simultaneously, some believe that this change only affected a small segment of society, particularly the educated and the young. "The change affected mostly the educated youth, as they have the ability to reach more than one type of media, and analyze and compare information," noted one participant. "The older generation, used to one type and one source of media, has maintained its old pattern, and made no progress towards analyzing different media." Some participants disagreed with this assessment and believed that no progress towards higher media literacy levels has been achieved. "The Syrian citizen still follows the media that represents his point of view, without making the effort to investigate other media he disagrees with," noted one respondent. Another claimed, "Media literacy does not exist. For forty years the regime dominated the media.... For forty years the people received the information without thinking and discussing it.... It is hard to change forty years in five years." One respondent even believed that this situation is acceptable and that the public does not need to be media literate.

While this latter opinion was an extreme view and represented only one participant, the analysis shows that most participants themselves had a weak understanding of media literacy and themselves may have had low media literacy levels. Two examples illustrate this conclusion. When asked about his approach to assessing news, one pro-government participant noted that he follows "multiple TV newscasts to get the full picture:" Al-Mayadeen, Syrian TV, Russia Today (Arabic) — which he described as neutral, and al-Jadeed TV. While this may seem like a fairly diverse number of sources, these four stations in fact are either fully supportive of the Syrian government (the first three), or pro-government leaning (the last).

On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, most pro-opposition supporters selected people they trust and agree with on social media to acquire their news. Moreover, responses from throughout the focus groups, especially from government supporters but also from pro-opposition participants, indicate that when participants are critical of certain media, these media tend to be in opposition to their beliefs and views. Media literacy is not simply about being critical of the media that individuals disagree with — as even the least media literate person can easily point out some of the problems and failures of media messages that clash with their belief s— but more so of media they agree with and subscribe to, since the latter are the media they consume while their critical defenses are down. And while a significant number of pro-opposition participants were critical of pro-opposition media, and to a lesser extent some pro-government participants were critical of pro-government media, the details as discussed earlier show that these critical views were mainly related to the failure of both media camps to support their causes and be effective in helping their side win the conflict. This is not the same as critiquing the news media for not serving their purpose of informing the public and upholding their professional and moral obligations. Another indication of the low media literacy levels is the lack of sophisticated analytical comments that reflect an understanding of structural, economic, technological, cultural and institutional limitations, especially in war zones and during conflict situations. While the political limitations that influence media production were quite prominent among the responses, even these tended to be quite superficial and often seen as a simple decision by an individual journalist or politician to impose their political agenda. Few if any participants referred to important limitations that influence news media production, such as dangers of venturing into certain areas and among certain crowds, access to accurate information, the ability to verify content, exorbitant costs of field production, difficulty of transporting journalists and equipment, deadline pressures, censorship and self-censorship, conflicting pressures from different politicians, contradictory threats from military and security personnel, sudden changes in political control over certain areas and institutions, high overturn in news personnel and instability of the news operation due to injuries and deaths, etc. The main commentary focused on political bias, incitement, violence, fueling divisiveness, following political agendas, all matters that are obvious to almost any audience member, regardless of their media literacy levels. Neutral participants were not overall better than partisan Syrians, as some of them did not care much about following news — another indication of weak media literacy levels — and were largely apolitical, but a small group did attempt to seek news from various sides and this group was the most critical of media content, regardless of its source. But even within this highly critical group of neutral participants, some statements hint to poor media literacy skills, such as the participant who bragged that he relies in the first place on news agencies, not on TV channels "because the political interference in news agencies is very limited." The latter statement demonstrates a lack of understanding of how news agencies are as prone to political interference as any other media. In a sense, this latter statement confirms the participants' assessment of low media literacy levels among Syrian audiences.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

This section offers a more detailed discussion and analysis of the findings addressed in the previous section. It summarizes the most important results and attempts to put these findings within the context of the conflict and highlight their implications for existing and emerging media institutions.

When it came to the perception of the role national, Arab and international media played in the conflict, the overall sentiment of Syrians is overwhelmingly negative. Based on the findings, most Syrians, regardless of their affiliation, saw that the media contributed to exacerbating the conflict by provoking hatred, sectarianism, and violence, and by exaggerating the number of victims and normalizing bloody and graphic content.

Unlike pro-government supporters who were mainly critical of opposition media, neutral Syrians and opposition supporters were critical of all media outlets, both pro-government and pro-opposition, although the latter lamented that pro-opposition media also contributed to exacerbating the division within the opposition camp. Nevertheless, the overall conviction is that media coverage of the Syrian conflict did more damage and worsened the situation, although different groups of Syrians, especially those who supported one side or the other, continued to follow media sources that reflected their political convictions, particularly local news media.

So, when it comes to local media sources, Syrian audiences were clearly divided along political lines and had a largely negative view of these media outlets. On one hand, government supporters mainly followed and trusted pro-government media and ignored and shunned opposition media. They admitted some (albeit justified) failures of the pro-government media at the start of the conflict, especially for not being able to counter the opposition media and not being inclusive in their coverage, but such failures, according to them, were rectified later with more inclusive and comprehensive coverage that also served the country better.

While pro-government Syrians largely ignored pro-opposition media, opposition supporters, on the other hand, severely criticized the government-controlled media, simultaneously acknowledging the success of its strategy to persist with a consistent rhetoric that demonized the opposition. But far from praising the opposition media, this group also criticized its performance, pointing to its failures and limits to effectively support the revolution. So, just as pro-government audiences criticized the ineffectiveness of pro-government media to support the government's political interests, their pro-opposition counterparts criticized the pro-opposition media for failing to support the political interests of the opposition. In other words, pro-opposition participants like pro-government participants justified any initial failures of the pro-opposition media, particularly in serving the revolution's cause — not in terms of serving to inform the public. They criticized the pro-opposition media for being divided, inexperienced and largely ineffective in countering pro-government media until recently when international media increasingly carried their coverage, but they had harsher criticism for the pro-government media, which they saw as deceptive, untruthful and only interested in mobilizing supporters — a matter that they succeeded in doing, according to opposition supporters. These two groups of partisan Syrians problematically continue to hope that their media operations will help their sides win the battle — although some of them also hinted that they hope such media will help in reconciliation — especially when it comes to political news and information about the progress of battles and the diplomatic efforts. However, these two groups, as discussed below, also have non-political information needs that are highlighted by a third group of non-partisans.

Indeed, aside from the two partisan groups, politically neutral participants had the harshest criticism for both pro-government and pro-opposition media and were turned off by their messages, describing them as biased, unprofessional, propagandistic, inflammatory, and more importantly disconnected from people's realities and needs. Simultaneously, this group praised the few media outlets that were concerned with people's daily needs and more in tune with their realities. They described such media as more trustworthy and influential. As the Syrian war drags into its seventh year, an increasing

number of Syrians will probably become disillusioned by this conflict and less hopeful of any positive outcome, and may therefore join the ranks of this politically neutral and non-partisan group. As such, the media and information needs of this group will likely become more important, considering that many of their needs overlap with those of the partisan groups, especially the mundane daily information needs, as discussed below.

Similar trends as above emerged for Arab/regional media. Most Syrians, regardless of their affiliation, tended to lump all Arab media together when expressing their negative view about their performance and role in the Syrian conflict. Nevertheless, Syrians were also divided along political lines when following Arab media sources, the same way they were divided in following local Syrian media. But despite them following Arab media outlets that reflected their own political affiliations, they still saw these regional media as playing a negative role in the conflict, serving their own governments' agendas, and offering biased coverage. Moreover, neutral Syrian participants were especially critical of Arab media and compared them to local Syrian media in inciting violence, fueling division among the Syrian people, and becoming part of the conflict.

As for international media, almost all Syrian participants, regardless of their political affiliations, did not follow these sources on a regular basis. However, they had a relatively positive view of such media and saw them offering largely objective and balanced news, albeit not sufficient enough for a local audience. In fact, the main negative remarks related to international media are their lack of sufficient focus on Syria, the broad scope of the coverage, and the emphasis of news that affected their own countries and contained visual content with a large impact, such as the relentless coverage of dead or injured Syrian children, the threat of ISIS, and the refugees problem in Europe.

Despite all the publicity of the role of digital, social and mobile media in the Arab uprisings, Syrians have a major distrust issue with these new media. Regardless of their political affiliations, Syrians have largely consistent views about new media and their negative role in the conflict. While recognizing the advantages of new media outlets, particularly their accessibility, speed, and diversity, almost all Syrian participants questioned their credibility and trustworthiness and described them as unreliable, biased, chaotic, and more likely to publish fabricated news, spread rumors, and desensitize people to violence and the horrors of war. A few important exceptions emerged, however. Syrians of all political colors praised a handful of emerging new media outlets, such Yomyat Kzefeh Hawen, which not only offered the advantage of speed of information and credibility — the two top priorities for selecting media sources according to most Syrians — but also the kind of information relevant to people's daily lives and needs — information that was also prioritized by most Syrians, as discussed below.

In general, four criteria emerged as common to selecting news sources among participants, especially neutral Syrians and pro-government supporters: (1) speed of news followed closely by (2) credibility of the news source, then (3) comprehensive coverage of all sides of the conflict followed by (4) objectivity, which was only mentioned by a few. However, many opposition supporters had a different criteria for selecting news, which is based on following trusted persons. In this case, trustworthiness (or credibility) was the most important criteria, but not the trustworthiness of the institution. Rather, it was the credibility of the person being followed, but since these sources are mainly accessed through social and mobile media, the criterion of speed of news is assumed too. So, in a sense, all segments of the Syrian audience prioritized speed and credibility, whether through media institutions or by following individuals on social and mobile media. It is important to highlight that these characteristics are not always accumulative. Some participants applied this criterion to different news platforms, getting one characteristic, such as speed, from one platform, and another characteristic, such as comprehensive coverage, from another platform. For example, they would get speed of news from social and mobile media, and a more detailed and comprehensive account from traditional media, such as television and newspapers. This highlights important guidelines for any current and future media outlet to pursue if they hope to win Syrian audiences and offer them value. While credibility is important — regardless of the speed of delivering information, the comprehensiveness of the news coverage and its objectivity — these latter three characteristics may be achieved through different platforms of the same media outlet. Moreover, all four criteria of media source selection are separate from the types of information these media should deliver.

Therefore, when it came to actual media content, Syrians seem to agree that they receive too much political information, and that they severely lack basic information about local and mundane daily matters that can make their lives easier, including information about primary health care, medicine, and first aid services; guidance about official logistical and administrative matters, such as how to get an ID or passport or how to request fixing damaged public works; supplementary educational material to make up for the loss of school time; basics of setting up businesses and economic enterprises during war times. In addition, some Syrians hoped that the news media would provide sufficient background information and context,

especially to new events and groups emerging during the conflict, as well as reliable studies and statistical information about the various industries and the economic situation in the country.

Finally, all participants believed that most Syrians have low media literacy levels and noted that the Syrian schools and universities are largely devoid of educational material and methods that focus on media literacy. In addition, almost all participants believed that media literacy education can play a positive role in the Syrian conflict by helping people become more aware and critical of misleading and fabricating information and by empowering them to add their voices to the discussion. Although some participants noted that the years of war and constant exposure to propaganda and fabricated content has brought the media literacy levels up, it is doubtful that such exposure could help increase media literacy levels among the public. In addition, participants' responses reflect that they themselves have relatively low levels of media literacy. Their critique of media tends to be superficial and rarely delves into important structural, economic, technological, cultural and institutional limitations on news media production and dissemination, especially during war and conflict. Their critique is often related to the media's failure to serve their political side and help them win rather than their failure to serve the public and inform Syrians. Even when their critical assessment of the media situation tended to be sophisticated and informed, in most cases such critique was targeted at media outlets that oppose their views. As such, media literacy is not only about critiquing and delineating the failures and problems in media that people oppose. Indeed, the most media literate people are able to assess and analyze the media outlets that support their own sides, opinions and ideologies — a matter that didn't feature high in the responses of participating Syrians.

APPENDIX A:
FOCUS GROUPS DEMOGRAPHICS

Focus group 1 included nine participants (5 males, 4 females). Their age range was 24-57, and they came from Damascus and its suburbs and Tartus. Their political orientation was predominantly pro-government, except for one pro-opposition participant. The focus group took place in Lebanon on June 16, 2016.

Focus group 2 included five participants (2 males, 3 females). Their age range was 22-25, and they came from Damascus and its suburbs. Their political orientation was predominantly neutral, leaning towards pro-government. The focus group took place in Lebanon on June 16, 2016.

Focus group 3 included five participants (4 males, 1 female). Their age range was 23-31, and they came from Damascus and its suburbs. Their political orientation was predominantly neutral. The focus group took place in Lebanon on June 17, 2016.

Focus group 4 included five participants (4 males, 1 female). Their age range was 26-35, and they came from Damascus, Hama, Idlib and Daraa. Their political orientation was predominantly pro-opposition (mainly Free Syrian Army). The focus group took place in Turkey on July 11, 2016.

Focus group 5 included three participants (2 males, 1 female). Their age range was 22-27, and they came from Tartus. Their political orientation was predominantly neutral and they were largely apolitical. The focus group took place in Turkey on July 11, 2016.

Focus group 6 included five participants (5 males). Their age range was 27-30, and they came from Aleppo, Damascus and Daraa. Their political orientation was predominantly pro-opposition. The focus group took place in Turkey on July 12, 2016.

Focus group 7 included four participants (3 males, 1 female). Their age range was 28-42, and they came mainly from Aleppo, Damascus and Daraa. Their political orientation was mostly neutral, leaning towards pro-opposition, but also critical of the opposition. The focus group took place in Turkey on July 12, 2016.

Focus group 8 included ten participants (9 males, 1 females). Their age range was 25-44, and they came from Aleppo, Damascus, Deir el-Zour, and Qamishli. Their political orientation was predominantly pro-opposition and spanned various opposition groups (Islamic and secular). The focus group took place in Turkey on July 13, 2016.

Focus group 9 included two participants (2 males). Their age range was 37-41, and they came from Homs and Idlib. Their political orientation was predominantly pro-opposition. The focus group took place in Turkey on July 14, 2016.

APPENDIX B:
FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR OUTLINE

A. Arrival of participants.

B. Welcome, purpose and ground rules:
Welcome and thank participants for their commitment. Explain the purpose of the focus group. Explain the ground rules: Confidentiality of the participants' identity, no right or wrong answers, one person speaking at a time, moderator defining the time allocated to each person, purpose of recording focus groups, permission to record (start recording), participants' questions and remuneration at the end of the focus group.

C. Discussion guide
1. Five years into the Syrian conflict, how do you assess, in general terms, the performance of the media with regards to the conflict situation?
2. Which media (Syrian/local, Arab/regional, International) do you think delivered a better performance in covering the Syrian conflict? Why? And how so?
3. What about new media (internet, social, mobile)?
4. What type of media do you resort to the most for news about the Syrian conflict: local TV, satellite TV, radio, newspapers, websites, social media or internet on mobile phone? What is the reason for which you prefer the chosen media type?
5. What are the criteria according to which you choose the news sources to follow? And how many news sources do you find really fitting these criteria?
6. How much do you trust information from the internet, social media and mobile phones?
7. Have you ever tried to watch the media of the opposite side? Why or why not?
8. Do you think the media have contributed to exacerbating or alleviating the conflict in Syria? Please describe how and give examples?
9. What is your estimation of the level of media literacy of the Syrian public in general? What is your estimation of your own level of media literacy?
10. How often do you participate in digital activities related to the Syrian conflict? And what is the reason behind your participation/non-participation?
11. To what extent do you deem your information needs to be satisfied by the available media?
12. What are your most important information needs? And are they being covered sufficiently?
13. What type of information that you need is not offered by any media?
14. Do you believe that media literacy can play a role in resolving the conflict in Syria? Give examples please.
15. Do you believe that media and digital literacy education is a right and should be taught to all Syrians?

D. Closing:
Thank you for participating. Distribute transportation reimbursements, and invite to lunch/dinner.