

**The evolution of the role of stringers, local
reporters and citizen journalists in
reporting wars and conflicts: the case of
the Syrian civil war**

Emanuele Bussa

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Communication and Journalism Department

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Abstract

The Syrian civil war was not only one of the longest running and bloodiest conflicts of the 21st Century but also one of the most difficult to cover for Western journalists and foreign correspondents. Official access to the country was hard to obtain and entry under any circumstances was risky and highly dangerous. Western news organisations had to rely on local stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists. But who are these Syrian 'media actors'? What are the characteristics of their work and the challenges they faced? And how was their journalistic identity perceived by themselves and by international news outlets?

This thesis examines these questions using a mixed methodology: underpinned by Bourdieu's field theory, it draws on a news framing and sourcing analysis of news published by five different news outlets in specific time tranches between 2018 and 2020. It complements this analysis through interviews with Syrian and international journalists, editors, citizen journalists and local journalists, analysing the data gathered through thematic analysis. The research highlights the partisan nature of the material produced, with Syrian stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters explicitly or implicitly influenced by activism or propaganda. This represents one of the main challenges faced by international news outlets as well as one of the main characteristics of the journalistic coverage of the conflict. Partisanship led to inherent contradictions and tensions in how stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters were perceived by international news outlets, both as precious contributors and as activists easily influenced by propaganda, due to their embeddedness. Stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters were not limited in their work, as boundaries of journalism proved to be fluid and shifting, therefore international news agencies had to adapt to their work improving their gate-keeping function and providing training when possible, allowing them to enter the field of journalism whose boundaries proved to be fluid and shifting.

My research shows that the coverage of the Syrian conflict represents a compromise between the traditional way of reporting war and the growing importance of other media contributors. In fact, in conflict areas characterised by limited access and sudden changes, labels defining journalistic identity and forms of journalism are fluid and

differentiated. It is hoped that this research can provide a starting point to build future models with which to approach the study of media coverage of conflicts characterised by limited access, where local media actors play a key role.

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Introduction

“Syria’s war may be the most documented ever. And yet, we know so little.” - Ivan Sigal, Global Voices¹

As Ivan Sigal pointedly notes, the Syrian conflict has been one of the most discussed yet least understood wars, due to its complexity and the difficulties international news outlets faced in accessing it to report on it. The conflict started as a series of protests against the Syrian government and quickly escalated into a full-scale war between the Syrian army and the anti-Assad Coalition. It gradually evolved into a series of proxy wars with the intervention of different terrorist groups and organisations including the Islamic State, with world powers supporting different sides. And until the spectacular implosion of the Assad government in December 2024, the war seemed destined to drag on in a never-ending stalemate. International news outlets are still struggling to formulate a complete picture of the situation on the ground, due to the instability that Syria has to face in these early stages of a post-Assad world, with the fall of the old government and the rise of a new one, led by those who were considered ‘rebels’², only months ago. Future developments raise even more questions, as no one seems to know for sure what will happen to the country³.

International news outlets tried their best in the early days to cover the war on the ground, in order to seek information not only from the Syrian government’s perspective, shared by government’s officials and official media agencies, but also from the ‘Coalition’⁴ side. This was necessary in order to obtain a complete picture of what was happening in Syria whilst adhering to Western journalistic values and standards of

¹ Ivan Sigal, executive director of Global Voices from 2008 to 2024, a Kluge Fellow in Digital Studies at the Library of Congress, and the board chair for the Open Society Foundation’s Documentary Photography Project. He was a fellow of Harvard University’s Berkman Klein Centre for Internet & Society, a 2016 Nonfiction Fellow at the Carey Institute for Global Good, and a senior fellow at the U.S. Institute of Peace.

<https://theworld.org/stories/2016/12/16/syrian-civil-war-heavily-documented-repeatedly-ignored>

² Syria’s rebel leaders say they have broken with their jihadist past.can they be trusted?, BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c2ldj04p0q2o>

³ Syria’s minorities seek security as country charts new future, BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2yqnewxrp0>

⁴ Syrian National Revolutionary Coalition (SNRC) is a political organization founded in Doha, Qatar, in November 2012 during the Syrian civil war in an attempt to coalesce the various movements opposed to Bashar al-Assad’s. I used this term in my thesis to identify all the revolutionary movements who opposed the Syrian government.

balanced reporting and objectivity. However, the warzones and then Syria itself soon became inaccessible for professional journalists. They faced difficulties accessing the country, mainly due to the restrictions imposed by the Syrian government, as well as a high risk of being killed or kidnapped while working on the ground. Only in December 2024, as Assad fled to Moscow, did the Western media flood back into the country, discovering - together with the Syrian population - the horrors wrought by the defeated government. In 2015, CPJ⁵ had ranked Syria as the most dangerous place for journalists for more than two years⁶. Many Western journalists lost their lives reporting on the conflict, including Marie Colvin, foreign affairs correspondent for *The Sunday Times*, James Foley, journalist for the *Global Post*, Remi Ochlik, freelance photojournalist, while others were kidnapped, like Eduard Elias, freelance photojournalist, Anthony Loyd, journalist for *The Times* and were released or managed to escape. Foreign journalists became targets, therefore it became too dangerous for news outlets to send their correspondents to Syria. At this stage, the local Syrian 'media actors' became even more key to reporting the conflict. They had first emerged in years prior to the conflict and then took centre stage.

The Syrian conflict originated from the initial large-scale protests against the Syrian government in 2011, in which many Syrian citizens actively participated. Therefore, when the situation escalated into a civil war, many people still wanted to make their contribution to the revolution, by covering what was happening to their country, denouncing the actions of the Syrian government and risking their life in the warzones. In this context, stories were generated by a multiplicity of diverse actors ranging from concerned citizens to activists, using blogs and social media to share content. They had direct access to the warzones and the frontline, which had moved into urban spaces, placing civilians in the middle of the conflict. These media actors gradually changed from figures supporting foreign correspondents, such as 'fixers,' to key contributors reporting on the ground. The journalistic value of the material and content produced by these Syrian media actors led international news agencies to start working and cooperating with them, especially with stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists, who became the key points of access to and main sources of news stories about the conflict.

⁵ The Committee to Protect Journalists is an independent, nonprofit organization that promotes press freedom worldwide. We defend the right of journalists to report the news safely and without fear of reprisal.

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28865514>

Furthermore, local and citizen journalists who were forced to leave Syria, continued to work from abroad, in the diaspora, founding their own news agencies and in turn employing media actors on the ground, churning out journalistic material to enhance the content published by international news outlets.

I have followed the development of the Syrian conflict since the beginning, especially through material and content shared on social media like Facebook and Twitter (now X). As I noticed the increased number of posts published by Syrians reporting about the situation in their own cities, in the warzones or in the refugee camps they fled to, I wanted to find out who these people were, what sort of information they provided and whether they actually were journalists or considered themselves journalists. Furthermore, I wanted to investigate whether Western news outlets thought they were journalists and whether they felt they could trust the information they provided. In the last two decades, the contribution of such ‘media actors’⁷ to reporting wars and conflicts has steadily increased, not only in terms of the volume of material produced, but also in terms of the role they are now playing in the journalistic environment, bestowing on them important new roles that in turn raise questions about professional identity.

In my research I aimed to examine the nature and the characteristics of Syrian media actors’ work, as well as to address the issue of the journalistic perceptions of their identity, both from the perspective of Western news organisations and from their own. Some of these media actors are well defined in academic and professional literature, such as local journalists, freelancers, stringers and fixers, but more contentious is the term citizen journalist. These terms are examined later in the literature review chapter, however, through my study, I set out to examine whether these definitions cover all the so-called media actors or not.

My thesis is underpinned by Bourdieu’s field theory which provides a way to consider, investigate and discuss the roles and identity of Syrian media actors through the system of norms and guidelines that define the journalistic field and the set of its ideal rules (*doxa*).

I also focused on the challenges Syrian media actors had to face in covering the conflict and working with international news agencies. Specifically, I set out to investigate

⁷ In my thesis, I use the term media actors to define stringers, freelancers, local journalists, citizen journalists, fixers who covered the conflict in Syria, working for different news outlets. I will then analyse and discuss their role in the next chapters.

whether they adapted to traditional journalistic standards, ethics and guidelines, or whether they decided to adopt their own, pushed by the situation they found themselves in, or influenced by activism and propaganda, due to their direct involvement in the conflict. In my research, I also tried to analyse how the factors listed above could actually influence the journalistic content produced by Syrian stringers, citizen journalists and local correspondents. Therefore, through my study I aimed to highlight, in the work and coverage of Syrian media actors, the elements of traditional conflict journalism along with those typical of other kinds of journalism, including peace, advocacy, and solutions journalism.⁸

The overarching aim of my study is to analyse the key characteristics of covering the conflict, the challenges faced by the Syrian media actors in reporting the war, their professional relationship with international media outlets and perceptions of their identity. Therefore, my thesis focuses on the following research questions:

- RQ1 What are the key characteristics of reporting about the Syrian civil war?
 - How is the Syrian civil war framed across a diverse range of news agency and media outlets?
 - How does analysis of the selectivity of sources used in media reports reveal the underlying influences shaping news framing?
- RQ2 Who are the media actors relaying information about the conflict and what challenges do they face?
 - How do they contribute to the coverage of the conflict and what is their role?
- RQ3 How do these media actors perceive their identity and how do Western news outlets perceive them?

In order to answer my RQs, I opted for a mixed methodology, gathering both quantitative and qualitative data to enrich my research. The methods I selected are based on three strands of analysis, focusing on news frames, sources and themes.

⁸ These terms are defined and discussed in my subsequent literature review chapter

- News framing analysis: I selected four specific time tranches between January 2018 to January 2020 and I analysed the articles published by five different news agencies, identifying the main frames emerging from the news stories.
- Sourcing analysis: from the stories and articles analysed in the news framing analysis, I identified the sources most frequently cited by the different news agencies.
- Thematic analysis: I conducted ten interviews with five Syrian media actors and five international editors and journalists and I analysed the main themes emergent from the set of interviews

This methodological approach, employing mixed methods, allowed me to investigate the different data and results gathered from each strand of analysis and analyse the coverage of the conflict from different perspectives. I tested my methodology using a pilot study⁹, in order to understand whether the methods I selected were suitable for my research project or not, before continuing.

At the end of the research process, I was able to identify four key themes that allowed me to address the research questions listed above:

- Access (to Syria, the battlefronts and sources)
- The partisan nature of journalism in covering the Syrian conflict
- Inherent contradictions and tensions between how local media actors perceived themselves and their work and how international news outlets perceived them.
- The shifting and fluid boundaries of journalism

The data gathered in my three strands of analysis supported me in identifying the four main themes that allowed me to get a general and more complete picture of the Syrian conflict's journalistic coverage, including its main characteristics, challenges and identities of its main contributors.

My thesis starts with a literature review which sets out the background to the Syrian conflict, the role of the media actors reporting the war, defining and analysing the terms

⁹ This study is included in the thesis as Appendix A, pp. 276-302

fixers, freelancers, stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists. It also highlights the themes of verification, gate-keeping, mediatisation of war and alternative forms of journalism that might emerge in covering conflict or humanitarian crises, including peace, solutions, advocacy journalism and journalism of attachment¹⁰.

The literature review is followed by a chapter setting out in detail the mixed methodology I adopted, including framing and sourcing analysis and semi-structured interviews. For news framing and sourcing analysis I selected four specific time tranches (January 2018, March and September 2019, January 2020) and I analysed the stories published by five different news outlets (SANA, NCS, Reuters, Global Voices, SNHR), trying to identify the main frame emerging from each story and the main sources cited. For the semi-structured interviews, I managed to contact and interview ten participants or media actors who covered and reported about the conflict, five from Syria and five from other countries.

Three empirical chapters follow: a framing analysis, a sourcing analysis and a thematic analysis of the data gathered during the interviews. As already stated, before starting to work on the three empirical chapters, I conducted a pilot study¹¹ in order to test my methodology. I analysed the stories published by the five selected news outlets in January 2018, trying to identify the main sources and frames. The pilot study was key to gathering the first data and deciding how to develop my study and organise my analysis. The news framing analysis chapter and the sourcing analysis chapter, were key to inform and contextualise the interviews, helping me to formulate the interview questions and focus on key themes to explore in the interviews. The data gathered from the interviews are analysed in the thematic analysis chapter, followed by a discussion chapter, where I analyse the results I obtained in the three strands of analysis listed above, and I discuss the main themes that characterise my research, regarding access, partisan nature of journalism, inherent tensions and contradictions, shifting and fluid boundaries of journalism.

At the end of the thesis, I analyse the final results in a conclusion chapter which allows me to discuss the main characteristics of reporting about the war, the main challenges the media actors had to face, along with issues regarding their journalistic identity.

¹⁰ These different forms of journalism will be analysed more in depth in the Literature Review Chapter

¹¹ This study is included in the thesis as Appendix A

Furthermore, I analyse strengths and weaknesses of my research and propose ideas for future studies on this subject.

Through my study, I was therefore able to investigate how news outlets found a way to collaborate with local media actors finding a common ground and compromises that allowed them to work together and cover the conflict. News outlets and media actors tried to overcome issues related to access, partisanship and inherent contradictions. I also realised that it is impossible to label these media actors and clearly define their journalistic identity, especially in conflict zones. In the end, my study led me to build a flexible and personalised model that could be used to study the coverage of conflicts with particular characteristics, built on the data and the findings gathered through my research journey.

Chapter 1 - Literature review

1.1 Introduction

The Syrian conflict broke out in March 2011 and can be traced back to the 'Arab Spring'¹². It is a complex conflict given the role played by the world's superpowers in fuelling the tension in a Cold War fashion and the divided Syrian opposition (which included the highly militant IS) (Hove and Muntada, 2015). The involvement of superpowers influenced the Syrian conflict in a way that would not have been the case without their participation (Hove and Muntada, 2015). France was the first European power to recognise the opposition coalition as the exclusive representative of the Syrian people (Saleh and Irish, 2012), while Russia was intensely opposed to the US influence in the Middle East and supported the Syrian government by dictating the tempo of the conflict. During the war, Moscow argued that peace talks were supposed to include Assad's government and its close ally Iran (Hove and Muntada, 2015). The conflict deeply divided the Arab World and serious damage was done to the country (Hove and Muntada, 2015), however al-Assad was also rehabilitated in the Arab League¹³, before his fall. Peace-making in Syria needed a compromise to be struck by Moscow and Washington, considering their active role in the conflict (Hove and Muntada, 2015) and the conflict further deepened sectarian violence in the region as it spread to Syria's neighbours such as Israel, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey (Hove and Muntada, 2015). Furthermore, the conflict was extremely difficult to cover for journalists. The problem was that journalists could enter the country either through the official channels by successfully applying for a government-approved visa, or through rebel-held areas (Vandevoordt, 2016). Journalists who entered rebel-held areas without permission from the Syrian government were considered to be collaborators and would no longer be granted an official visa (Vandevoordt, 2016). Therefore, it was particularly difficult and

¹² The Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in the early 2010s. It began in Tunisia in response to corruption and economic stagnation. From Tunisia, the protests then spread to five other countries: Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. Rulers were deposed (Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia in 2011, Muammar Gaddafi of Libya in 2011, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt in 2011, and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen in 2012) or major uprisings and social violence occurred including riots, civil wars, or insurgencies. Sustained street demonstrations took place in Morocco, Iraq, Algeria, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman and Sudan.

¹³ Al Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/19/assad-gets-warm-welcome-as-syria-welcomed-back-into-arab-league>

dangerous for foreign correspondents to enter Syria and report directly on the ground, so they had to rely on collaboration with different and alternative media actors. These quickly began to provide support to foreign correspondents, as well as content and information, working independently in the field or collaborating with journalists and news outlets to report on the conflict.

This chapter reviews academic literature relating to the key questions explored in my thesis and the nature of modern reporting in the case of the Syrian conflict; it focuses on the changes that have occurred in the nature of conflict journalism, the meaning of being a journalist in this digital age, the blurred boundaries of the field of journalism, the identity of the actors relaying information from conflict zones and the challenges such information poses for established players seeking to verify it. The chapter also examines existing literature on changes in the nature of news sourcing, different kinds of journalism and the coverage of the Syrian conflict which relied on established media actors as well as non-traditional media actors.

1.2 Modern journalism and media actors

In the last decades, Western journalism has undergone a fast and impressive evolution that has dramatically changed the concept of journalism, due to the development of new technologies and the appearance of new actors able to play an important role in this area. In fact, while in the 20th century a journalist was considered a professional whose unique access to experts, sources and mass audiences allowed him or her to create news and products that were incredibly valuable (Lewis, 2012), with the rise of the digital age, arguably anyone has been able to relay information about what is happening in the world, from the realm of politics to the war-torn streets of Syria. As stated by Tett (2017), media workers can sit near the front line while discussing the situation with colleagues half a world away. They can also use their laptops to get information from across the war zone as well as posting their stories online so that they can be instantly viewed around the world. In this digital scenario, the roles played by local reporters, stringers and even citizen journalists have gradually increased in importance (Tett, 2017).

In order to provide a more precise understanding of the role, the contribution to the journalistic coverage and the characteristics of the work of the media actors taken into consideration, it is useful to explore academic literature relating to definitions.

1.3 Citizen journalism

Allan and Thorsen (2009: p. I-II) define one of the key concepts that has emerged in recent years - citizen journalism - as follows:

“The spontaneous actions of ordinary people, caught up in extraordinary events, who felt compelled to adopt the role of a news reporter.”

They therefore are individuals or groups who are not aligned with publishers as ‘professional journalists’ (Tilley and Cokley, 2008). Citizen journalism enters into and informs today’s world news ecology with its overlapping flow of news, mainstream and alternative media, user-generated content and technologies of news dissemination (Allan and Thorsen, 2009). News agencies are fully aware of the added value of forms of citizen journalism evinced by its integration into news packages and at the same time, staking out independent platforms of news delivery and dissemination (Allan and Thorsen, 2009). Thanks to this news-gathering potential, news outlets have established formal links to encourage citizens to submit their mobile news material. Citizen-generated content, in turn, can generate other information and images, fuelling ‘endless remixes, mashups and continuous edits’ (Deuze, 2008: p. 861). Citizen journalism has been instrumental not only in providing newsworthy images, but also in defining the news itself. Citizen journalists collect, edit, and provide publishers with news material that was out of the publishers’ reach, or they publish this content directly using websites, blogs, and social media (Tilley and Cokley, 2008). This concept is also linked to new media technologies where immediacy rather than authenticity became of primary importance. On the one hand, there are real issues of simulation, manipulation, partisanship and lack of accountability. On the other hand, ‘right here, right now’ citizen journalism can bring authenticity, immediacy and realism to news stories through the production of dramatic and visually powerful ‘evidence’ of events ‘as they happen’ (Ibrahim, 2014). The evolving relationship between traditional and new media has been characterised as a ‘hybrid media environment’ where mainstream media are challenged

by new media actors in power struggles to 'control, police and redraw boundaries' of political communication (Chadwick, 2011).

The rise of bloggers and citizen journalists from early 2000s forms the backdrop to the Arab uprisings of 2011, but they can hardly be considered as causal agents; rather, some argue that they are part of the wider media ecology that challenges or accommodates the power structures in authoritarian and transitional societies depending on the context and chain of events (Chouliaraki, 2014). News is no longer something distributed only by news organisations, but is now also redistributed and circulated by its readers, viewers and users. These practices of sharing should be understood as part of what is defined as citizen journalism. The convergence of the professional and the non-professional is as much about networking and connection, about sharing and its resulting visibility, as it is about public writing (Thurman and Rodgers, 2014). In addition, according to Friedland and Kim (2009), this means citizens do not just 'participate' in the news making processes with professional journalists but can also actively 'practise' as independent journalists in the journalistic field. They can play an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing, and disseminating news and information and are sometimes seen as an alternative and activist form of news gathering and reporting that functions outside mainstream media institutions (Radsch, 2016). The rise of social media helped marginalised groups come into the spotlight and has provided them with the means to communicate with journalists and news outlets; the collaboration between citizen journalists and news outlets leads to an interdependent relationship which includes news organisations, citizen journalists and even activists (Kamel, 2014), as in the Syrian conflict where activists have been at the forefront of Western reporting about the conflict (Zahera, 2017). In addition, Schechter (2003) defined as 'bottom-up coverage' the extraordinary contribution made by ordinary citizens offering their first-hand reports, digital photographs, camcorder video footage, mobile telephone snapshots or audio clips. Much of this material, taken up by news organisations seeking to augment their own coverage, had a profound influence on audience perceptions of the crises around the world. The online reporting of everyday citizens, possesses the capability to bring to bear alternative perspectives, context and ideological diversity to news reports, providing Internet users with the means to hear distant voices otherwise being marginalised, if not silenced altogether, across uneven mediascapes (Allan, Sonwalkar, Carter, 2007). Allan and Thorsen (2009) noted that citizens amplify

alternative voices, bypass established media and offer a more authentic sense of reality, using their contribution to be civically engaged and to propel others to be more involved. Therefore, such information exchange is shifting empowerment towards civic engagement via online journalistic production by citizens (Allan and Thorsen, 2014).

In my study, the main focus is on citizen journalism that arises from the early moments of the humanitarian crisis in Syria, analysing examples of interpretative, collaborative and brokering citizen journalism activities that have surfaced by necessity in conflict zones too remote or too dangerous for non-local reporters and it is in these, circumstances that citizen journalism is not bounded solely by the eyewitness user-generated content frame (Norris, 2017). It is therefore clear that digital technology facilitated the further growth of freelance journalism as potentially anyone can use new apps, cameras, software and social networks to move around the globe and report, sometimes as quickly and effectively as staff reporters (Murrell, 2014). Foreign correspondents had therefore to face the exponential growth of citizen journalists providing user-generated content (UGC) to major media organisations (Murrell, 2014). Moreover, when correspondents arrive at a crisis these days spectacular eyewitness video may already have been uploaded onto the internet by citizen journalists, NGO workers or amateur photographers who can also share information about fixers, visas, border crossings (Murrell, 2014). Media organisations' constant need for instant (and cheap) news is leading to a broader acceptance of citizen journalism, at the expense of the traditional model of bureau-based correspondent (Murrell, 2014). However, news outlets will always be concerned about verification issues associated with UGC and will want the expertise and experience of their own foreign correspondents to investigate, explain and mediate stories for the audience (Murrell, 2014).

1.4 Fixers, stringers, freelancers, local journalists

There are also other roles and media actors that are largely recognised in the journalistic field. Palmer (2019) states that 'more than ever before, it is safe to assume recognition among scholars of journalism and international communication that the various types of invisible or underground journalistic labour' often referred to simply as 'fixing' are integral to the practice of cross-border journalism. Hamilton and Jenner (2004) recognised that 'fixing' can be an umbrella term for various types of journalistic as well as journalism-adjacent labour, such as stringers and local journalists, conducted both by

journalists and non-journalistic agents. Fixers are usually defined as locally based media workers that help foreign reporters and correspondents to arrange interviews, interpret foreign languages and navigate challenging geographical and cultural terrain (Palmer, 2019). When foreign reporters travel outside of their familiar territory, they are operating at a severe disadvantage in terms of their ability to gather news (Murrell, 2014). In employing fixers, correspondents have a perfect, non-permanent teammate with whom to work on problem-solving, with the correspondent holding the same keys of access that he or she would have back on home soil (Murrell, 2014). Nonetheless, in recent years, media companies and their correspondents have improved the treatment of their short-term hires by giving them safety training and possibilities for advancement within the organisations (Murrell, 2014). However, the same person can in fact play the multiple roles of photojournalist, journalist, stringer or fixer depending on the assignments (Palmer, 2019). This category of labour, often undertaken on intensely precarious terms, encompasses information-sourcing and cultural mediation, logistics and security assessment, translation and interviewing, and even the production of primary news texts and images, often without any public or professional recognition (Palmer, 2019; Khan and Mirza, 2020). Kotišová and Deuze (2022) argue that divisions between journalist and fixer are usually essentialised, however, the recognition of such divisions can bring awareness to the inequalities present in news fixing and other forms of local-foreign news work. It is therefore important to highlight the complexity of fixers and locally based media workers in relation to foreign correspondents. The locally based media employees help foreign reporters translate interviews, build contacts, and navigate the cultural contexts with which correspondents are increasingly unfamiliar (Palmer, 2018b). Therefore, local media workers are not just translators who provide a service in exchange for payment, as the work of the foreign correspondent as well as their safety depends on them. They are especially necessary when correspondents are working in conflict zones, since their culturally specific knowledge can help journalists avoid injury or even death. Therefore, the relationship between foreign journalists and the locally based news workers is key in order to allow foreign reporters to tell the story of what is happening in politically tense regions of the world (Palmer, 2018b). As stated before, the general term 'locally based media workers' include stringers who are usually local reporters often working as independent contractors for foreign news organisations and often covering peripheral or dangerous areas (Bank and Leyden, 1991). On the other

hand, local journalists are journalists who report on their home country for a local news audience, but, in times of crisis or war, they are usually contracted by foreign news outlets (Bunce, 2011), while freelance journalists are not employed by one organisation, but they are paid for each piece of work they do by the organisation they do it for (Osnowitz and Hanson, 2016).

Stringers, freelancers and local correspondents have likely been trained in the media system of their home nation, but they work for news outlets that emerged in a Western media environment (Bunce, 2011). These people are central in news gathering, acting as an interface between the news outlets, the sources, and the site (Palmer, 2018a). As 'insiders' to the field they report on, local-national journalists and stringers have language skills and local knowledge that surpasses that of Western foreign correspondents (Bunce, 2011). In addition, they may be better equipped to assess the significance of an event within its local context and they are also more likely to have access to a wider variety of sources, as a result of their deep involvement in local communities and networks (Bunce, 2011). According to Borden (2009), a local journalist lives and breathes its society and by definition knows it better, therefore, these traits may render local reporters and stringers far better equipped to offer a nuanced account of events presenting a more accurate, local interpretation, with less reliance on simplification or stereotypes. For Borden (2009), the real key to inspired reporting on the world is a well-trained, well-supported local journalist who has finally been empowered to tell his or her own story. Therefore, the increased use of local-national stringers also means international news values interact with local news values and the space between the local and the foreign is today smaller and yet more complex than ever before (Bunce, 2011). In fact, as affirmed by Eldridge (2017), it has been harder to bind journalism to a notion of recognisability, as the concept of journalism is a constantly shifting denotation applied differently depending on context. Therefore, the rise of media actors is an inevitable consequence (Carlson and Lewis, 2015).

From this point on, the term Syrian media actors will refer to local reporters, fixers, freelancers and citizen journalists.

1.5 Media actors and journalist identity

Eldridge (2018) called these media actors 'Interlopers', as they express that journalistic roles can be performed with attitudes towards information that fall outside the idealised portrait of journalism that prevailed in the media throughout the 20th century. According to McQuail (2013), journalists are free to choose or avoid a variety of goals and tasks, within the scope of their occupation, so the news media generally resent and resist attempts to prescribe any role for them in society, except as self-chosen. The truth is a fundamental principle in journalism and it has come to be primarily identified with neutral, reliable, verifiable reporting and with expert analysis and interpretation (McQuail, 2013). In addition, truth in journalism is widely identified with the practice of 'objectivity,' which has sometimes emphasised neutrality and balance on the part of a reporter and a limitation as far as possible to verifiable 'facts' of any case, but the conditions for attaining any complete 'truth' in relation to ongoing human affairs are not really attainable (McQuail, 2013). Objectivity is a particular form of media practice and embodies a neutral attitude to the task of collecting, processing and disseminating information. It presumes a lack of ulterior motive or concealed service to a third party. This means being rational, logical, undistorted by emotion or manipulative intention and dedicated only to uncovering and disseminating demonstrable truth. It invites the trust of those who accept the sincere intention of being truly objective (Atton, 2002a). That said, as Westerstahl (1983) makes clear, objective news reports always have an evaluative as well as a factual dimension and the very act of selecting topics and the related 'facts' for notice in the news is guided by implicit judgements of value and significance. McQuail (2013) states that the idea of objectivity might also be undermined by other factors, such as:

- Bias described as a tendency to deviate consistently from a neutral line. It happens in various ways, especially by selective attention, selective omission, one-sided interpretation or by making implicit negative or positive judgements.
- Propaganda which is defined as conscious and systematic efforts to use the means of public communication to advance an ideological cause or material interest of the sender or source, often by covert means and without regard for anyone else's truth or the true interests of the recipient. Journalists rarely make

propaganda on their own initiative but they can be conduits for the propaganda of others, whether knowingly or not.

- Ideology is defined as an implicit normative direction given to reports, drawing on some belief or value system that is not explicated or called into question. It has its origin and basis in the history and culture of the society from which news originates or for whom it is intended as well as in a particular journalistic culture. ideology is 'the main source of deviation in news reporting from a standardized base in more or less objective news values' (Westerstahl and Johansson, 1994: p. 77).

Technology has made a decisive difference to the use and accessibility of alternative sources of information, especially in societies characterised by authoritarianism or dictatorships. In fact, prior to the development of the internet, these outlets were limited by their access to printing or broadcasting technology and distribution mechanisms as they are expensive, and fairly easily disrupted by the interests of the state (Knight and Cook, 2013). The internet and social media suddenly changed the scenario, and alternative and mainstream sources of news were now accessible.

The new movement of amateur journalism based on the internet, and the existing activist movements that had been using old media forms, moving onto the internet, have been joined as a movement of citizen journalists, part of a new, revived, public sphere (Knight and Cook, 2013). Therefore, according to Knight and Cook (2013), citizen journalism, in as much as it exists, poses a theoretical challenge to the professional identity of journalists, and the boundaries of the journalistic field.

However, in the new and emerging type of journalism online, Eldridge (2018) also sees the same insistence on 'belonging' and a similar conflict between those traditionally seen as journalists and antagonistic interloping newcomers seeking recognition. According to this argument, the main goal of these media actors, whose importance and visibility is growing in the journalistic world, is gaining credibility and a recognised status, therefore, they are usually mainly seeking to acquire their own identity as professional journalists. On the other hand, as argued by Benkler (2013), it might be found that their journalistic identity and role are made salient at different times, and this is mainly due to the fact that journalism could be identified as something performed in moments,

where a member of the field can move in and out of pre-organised identities (Eldridge, 2018).

According to Bourdieu (1983), the term 'field' is a spatial metaphor for analysing objective relations within a bounded social setting. For him, 'every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence, and for the determinations it imposes on its occupants, on the other positions constituting the field' (1983: p. 312). These objective relations are 'invisible, or visible only through their effects' (1983: p. 311). The field is a concept for understanding social phenomena, through relationships (Munnik, 2018). Regarding the journalistic field, Bourdieu's emphasis was on the highly heteronomous character of the journalistic field: journalists are beholden to agents in other fields in order to carry out their work (Munnik, 2018). The field is determined by the persistent system of norms and the guidelines defined by the doxa which organise action within the field (Benson and Neveu, 2005) and is a set of ideal rules that evolves through dialogue and practice (Bourdieu, 1993). The concept of habitus is also fundamental. Bourdieu defines habitus as 'a property of actors (whether individuals, groups or institutions) that comprises a 'structured and structuring structure' (1987|1994: p. 131).

"The word disposition seems particularly suited to express what is covered by the concept of habitus. It expresses first the result of an organising action, with a meaning close to that of words such as structure; it also designates a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination." (Bourdieu 1972 | 1977: p. 214).

However the habitus is not unchangeable; it is constantly being modified (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992). In other words, any explanation of attitudes, discourses, behaviour, etc. must draw on an analysis of both structural position and the particular historical trajectory by which an agent arrived at that position (habitus) (Benson and Neveu, 2005: p. 3). In this scenario, the term 'capital' is also crucial:

- Economic capital: is money or assets that can be turned into money (Benson and Neveu, 2005).

- Cultural capital: encompasses such things as educational money, credentials, technical expertise, general knowledge, verbal abilities, and artistic sensibilities. (Benson and Neveu, 2005).

Bourdieu (1993) sees the journalistic field as both part of the cultural capital and of the economic capital which means it tends to engage with those agents who possess high volumes of capital. It lies between the fields of 'restricted' and 'large-scale' cultural production, therefore it is characterised by a great degree of heteronomy (Bourdieu, 1993). Furthermore, it is constantly influenced by new agents entering into the field, serving either as forces for transformation or conservation (Bourdieu, 1993) – this is of particular relevance to my thesis and research questions. New agents can only establish themselves by marking their difference with those already in the field, and thus have the greatest incentive to found a new kind of news outlet or adopt a distinctive editorial voice (Benson and Neveu, 2005). Media actors who are usually placed outside the boundaries of the journalistic field (Eldridge, 2018) can be considered as new agents who can provide dynamism to the field, depending on their educational and socio-economic backgrounds and how they rose to the profession (Benson and Neveu, 2005).

In fact, in the journalistic field, the persistent system of norms and the guidelines can be defined by the *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1993), which is a set of ideal rules that evolves through dialogue and practice. This views journalists as members of an interpretive community, one united by its shared discourse and collective interpretations of key public events (Zelizer, 1993). In general, *doxa* are subject to pressure from outside the field by different sets of agents and factors that involve individual agency and shaped by journalists' experience, perception, and judgment on the conditions inside and outside the field (Bourdieu, 1993).

The claims of journalistic belonging made by emerging digital media have challenged the way we think about journalism (Eldridge, 2018). In particular, this challenge is identified in commentary and reactions that emphasise the novelty of their approach to journalism alongside their genesis outside familiar spaces of journalism.

One of the answers found by the journalistic world in reaction to this phenomenon is 'normalisation,' which can diminish confrontation posed by new media technologies,

new actors and their actions, by mapping professional journalistic routines onto new technological affordances thereby normalising their use under everyday routines (Eldridge, 2018). Blogging is one of the paradigmatic examples of normalisation. From blogs to the more recent phenomenon of Wikileaks.¹⁴ Interlopers have a decent track record of injecting new narratives into spaces of public consideration (Eldridge, 2017) and the claim of being journalists and of belonging to a field of journalism disrupts the relative stability attained by the field of journalism. In the journalistic field, the persistent system of norms and the guidelines can be defined by the *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1993), which is a set of ideal rules that evolves through dialogue and practice. This views journalists as members of an interpretive community, one united by its shared discourse and collective interpretations of key public events (Zelizer, 1993). In general, *doxa* are subject to pressure from outside the field by different sets of agents and factors that involve individual agency and shaped by journalists' experience, perception, and judgment on the conditions inside and outside the field (Bourdieu, 1993).

Therefore, belonging to a context rests on the idea that there is a shared notion of fitting within the field, shared by peer members and the inherent criteria of the *doxa*, alongside a notion of the field as a coherent societal space (Eldridge, 2018). Viewing this through the perspective of Bourdieu's field theory suggests that the rise of the internet, blogs and social media has generated a shift in the journalistic field as new agents gain access. Therefore, the lines and boundaries between the journalistic field and new media actors have become blurred, allowing so-called interlopers to access the field directly and provide their content directly to the public, i.e. disintermediation (Vos, Craft, Ashley 2012). As previously stated, the stability of the journalistic field has been endangered by the rise of media actors along with the great technological developments witnessed during the last decade.

The concept of audience has greatly changed as well. Eldridge (2018) argues that new audiences are no longer merely recipients of information but have become individual users who can adopt utilitarian and highly individualised approaches to news and

¹⁴ WikiLeaks is a multi-national media organisation and associated library. It was founded by its publisher Julian Assange in 2006.

WikiLeaks specializes in the analysis and publication of large datasets of censored or otherwise restricted official materials involving war, spying and corruption. It has so far published more than 10 million documents and associated analyses. <https://wikileaks.org/>

information through different media repertoires with differentiated media users. As individuals tailor their own media repertoires to satisfy specific information ends (Hasebrink, 2017), agenda setting and journalistic authority are converted to a set of diffuse practices shared by media and audience actors alike; this is further affected by the ability of atomised publics to consolidate in digital communities who intervene in unidirectional models of new transmission (Bodker, 2016).

The whole system based on the boundaries of the journalistic field is therefore changing, adapting to the new journalistic scenario. Boundary work captures the way certain journalistic forms and actors are championed in ways that delegitimise others, as interlopers and the establishment might both see themselves as members of the journalistic field; they hardly see the field in the same terms (Eldridge, 2018).

In the final analysis, according to Eldridge (2018), interlopers seek recognition as journalists from within the field and are able to share news and information with the public in their interest. As media actors contribute to the informative roles of journalism, they might display new forms of journalistic endeavour and lay new claims to journalistic identity (Eldridge, 2018). The emergence of journalists rejecting interlopers' journalistic claims draws attention to two points (Carlson and Lewis, 2015):

- There is the persistence with which digital actors claim belonging to a seemingly established journalistic field.
- The ardent assertion that boundaries are the product of élite power dynamics.

As Eldridge (2018) states in his studies on boundary theory, interlopers look at the centre of the field and for representation of what it means to belong to a shared idea of journalism and see journalistic recognition as a possibility. On the other hand, the ways in which scholars conceptualise the journalistic field have not evolved as fast as the digital changes. This includes gaps in determining how new types of digital actors can also fit within understandings of the journalistic field. Considering the dynamism of the digital era and the past coherence of the common vision about the journalistic field, it appears clear that this field is susceptible to new forms of journalistic practice and identity.

Therefore, media content produced by interlopers represents a pushback against an idea that journalism rests solely within the traditional media field and interlopers

illustrate how journalistic roles can be performed with attitudes towards information that fall outside the idealised portrait of journalism painted by journalistic actors (Eldridge, 2018).

It is not surprising that, while the evidence suggests a push towards a citizen-centred journalism, with respondents talking about collaborating with their communities and letting citizens in to help write their own stories, tensions around practices that journalists use to maintain their authority are evident (Konieczna, Hatcher and Moore, 2018). In fact, despite working to let citizens in, the journalistic world does not see traditional journalism being replaced by the work produced by citizens (Konieczna, Hatcher and Moore, 2018). Lewis (2012) goes so far as to suggest there may be a new ethic of participation emerging in journalism that could lead to a hybrid resolution of the professional-participatory tension that envisions audience integration as a normative goal of a truly digital journalism.

This new ethic of participation is directly connected to the great amount of journalistic material which is produced every day, not only by professionals but also by citizens. On the other hand, fixers, local reporters and stringers, who have played a key role in conflict journalism for more than a century, have seen their importance constantly grow. Furthermore, the possibility to share information and news on multiple digital platforms, including social media, is one of the most important factors that has contributed to the evolution of the role of professional journalists, who need to adapt to the various new scenarios.

1.6 Adaptation and change

Technological development has transformed the journalistic world into a fast-paced environment where social media have the potential to bypass or short circuit traditional forms and spaces of journalism, to usurp the apparent authority and objectivity of the tightly packaged article or broadcast report and empower the private citizen to make his or her own news (McLaughlin, 2016). This is not the only challenge that traditional journalism has faced in recent years. Since stories are being generated by a multiplicity of diverse actors, journalists have a role as verifiers (Martin, 2017). However, as Groshek and Tandoc (2017) state, the possibility to share news on social networks has allowed anyone to act as a reporter, challenging the role of professional journalists as editorial

gatekeepers. Therefore, established news organisations find themselves in a phase of transition. On the one hand, they are trying to protect their boundaries; on the other hand, at the same time, they are trying to engage with this new reality in order to adapt to this emerging new environment and realise the potential benefits of this culture (Du, 2007). This particular scenario has led to the rise of more news organisations and online outlets that usually rely on citizen journalists instead of paying a reporter and sending him or her out into the field (Flitton, 2012). The increasing use of local reporters in the field has also posed an additional challenge to the concept of traditional journalism. As stated by Markham (2012), indigenous local reporters come under pressure to be more aligned to the Western view of journalism, in order to produce content that could really be taken into consideration by the most important Western news organisations. However, being local also represents a great advantage, as local reporters cover events and facts as they see them, without any kind of prejudice (Markham, 2012), it is the phenomenon of the so-called naïve Journalism, but to be defined as above, reporting must not be influenced by activism or propaganda.

These media actors have taken advantage of the rise of the new digital media, gaining their own space on new media platforms and in social media acting as journalists and sharing journalistic material that sometimes collides with the traditional notion of journalism itself, while, in other cases, it can actually pass through the boundaries of the journalistic field, gaining recognition and journalistic value.

Online media have gradually become the primary 'content delivery vehicles in the history of the world' (Herring, 2010: p. 223) allowing users to go beyond their role as information consumers and start acting as gatekeepers and content creators, mirroring the functions of traditional journalism (Herring, 2010). These changes have also had a great impact on the audience, as the public can choose from many different sources, providing different angles and perspectives on the same news stories; however, they would also generate a fragmentation of the audience itself, along with the risk of fake news and propaganda (McLaughlin, 2016).

1.7 Conflict journalism

The evolution of traditional journalism has had a particular impact on conflict journalism, where media actors have traditionally faced the challenges that come with being objective and bearing witness.

Bearing witness renders the observation of suffering in order to report it as not only morally acceptable, but a moral imperative, and this in turn makes sense of the risks journalists may take (Tait, 2011). This conceptually organises what journalism does, and names a subject position for audiences other than voyeurism (Tait, 2011). In fact, according to Markham (2012), war reporting is traditionally conceived in terms of information retrieval and processing structured according to wider cultural values such as bearing witness, giving voice and holding power to account. On the other hand, there are many different factors that could influence the work of traditional war reporters operating in the field. Knightly (2004) underlined the risk that a war correspondent might become a propaganda machine, sacrificing objectivity, as censorship along with political influence or patriotism could possibly lead the reporter to support a particular political line, instead of reporting what s/he sees and create an objective and complete picture of the war situation.

Tumber (2004) also identifies objectivity as a social responsibility for journalists, however, he argues that reporters usually become trapped within two extreme positions:

1. Detached Reporting: condemned for a dispassionate stand
2. Journalism of attachment: human face of war reporting, accused for being self-righteous, moralising, and not objective.

War reporters have the moral obligation to report the truth as well as describing the facts as they are, in fact, the concept of truth-telling is the basis on which a reporter builds the foundations of their work. Its authority rests on bearing witness, on presence, on moral duty. However, war reporting also faces military, political, technological and economic limitations that could possibly curtail the reporting experience (Allan and Zelizer, 2004). On the other hand, Beaumont (2009) thinks that there is a need for a reminder of how war is experienced personally in individuals' lives. He focuses on the sights, sounds and emotions and relates them not to history but to what it is to be

human. In this particular case, Beaumont's experience as a war reporter influenced his conception of conflict journalism as well as shifted the shape of his own identity. The transformation the reporter goes through writing about war stories leads to a final stage where it is difficult for the journalist to make distinctions and to maintain the small, intimate and necessary perspective that reveals the humanity of each person the reporter encounters (Beaumont, 2009).

Freelancers, on the other hand, approach war from a different perspective. They are usually more flexible, covering the stories and usually focusing on different points of view. Witnessing is still the keyword, even for freelancers who have the possibility to tell the story, sometimes avoiding media criteria (Biloslavo and Micalessin, 2018). However, even for freelancers or citizen journalists, there are risks related to the lack of objectivity, due to activism, identification and political values.

1.8 Alternative forms of reporting conflict

Conflict journalism is also strongly related to other forms of journalism that offer interesting insights about reporting war and usually provide different perspectives or use a more specific lens to analyse conflicts and military crises.

Embedded journalism, connected to conflict journalism, was a system created by the US government with 600 journalists placed with frontline and rear echelon units before and during the Second Gulf War (2003), giving reporters access to service members and operational combat missions as well as to a large number of sources (Fahmy and Johnson, 2005). This practice was severely criticised for compromising the independence of journalists (Kupe, 2003), but editors defended it on practical grounds (Linnebank, 2003). According to Shaw (2003), embedded journalists could abandon their professional detachment and be co-opted into reporting more favourably and less sceptically than the facts may warrant. The challenge of maintaining perspective involves two dimensions (Pfau et al. 2004):

- There is the obvious danger that journalists could become too close to the fighting men and women they are covering, losing perspective.
- There is the possibility that embedding might produce a narrow, de-contextualised coverage of war.

Embedded reporting produces news coverage that is more favourable in tone, both towards the military, generally, and towards its personnel in particular, as embedding makes journalists members of individual military units (Pfau et al. 2004). This allows journalists to come to know the troops they are covering and potentially to internalise the values of the military unit they are embedded in. At the same time, journalists get to cover combat operations up close, giving them access to warzones, but, in the process, they lose perspective and, thus, sacrifice the idealised standard of reporter objectivity (Pfau et al. 2004). Embedding is attractive for media organisations, because of cheap and instantly transmittable footage, however, military reasoning determines reporting: war reporting becomes part of operational planning (Brandenburg, 2007). Censorship becomes obsolete because by definition it refers to stemming the outwards flow of information, therefore, once the reporter becomes 'part of the team', the military controls the outwards flow of information (Brandenburg, 2007). Embedded journalism enhanced access to warzones, however sometimes, during the Second Gulf War, in 2003, journalists had to submit reports to military censors. An important part of the critique of embedding highlighted that this form of journalism could move journalists away from objectivity towards partisan reporting.

Diaspora and exile journalism describes journalists relocated outside their home countries for various political, personal, or professional reasons (Ogunyemi, 2018): the term 'exile journalists' describes a subgroup of news workers who were forced to flee their home countries due to threats, persecution, imprisonment, or censorship related to their journalistic work (Dodds, Arafat and Yeung, 2024). According to Keles (2016), recent years have shown a noticeable rise in the formation of diasporic media. These organisations often provide news, entertainment, and information that cater specifically to the interests and needs of diaspora communities, maintaining cultural connections and addressing issues relevant to the diaspora's experience in a new country (Ogunyemi, 2018).

As in the case of the Syrian conflict, diaspora journalists and media might also approach the ongoing conflicts in their homelands and engage in transnational advocacy practices (Arafat, 2023). They could therefore create diasporic news websites that promote counter-narratives to the state-owned media (Arafat, 2023) and build digital networks that 'blur boundaries between journalism, activism, human rights advocacy, social

movements, and civil society work' (Arafat, 2021: p. 2174). In addition, they could further use their diasporic communities to promote news safety in their conflict-torn homelands by providing professional safety training, releasing solidarity statements for detained journalists, offering emergency rescue for local journalists under attack, and releasing safety guides or codes of conduct (Porlezza and Arafat, 2022).

The work of diaspora journalists and organisations has also played an important role in the constant development of cross-border, collaborative and cross-boundary journalism. In fact, the formation of formal transnational and cross-boundary networks among journalists has opened up new possibilities, especially in areas of reporting where safety and security issues are paramount (Mitra, Valderrama and Krøvel, 2025). These practices, born out of necessity, due to diminishing newsroom investment, or the affordances of collaborative platforms and communication technologies, might now be said to stretch over and across the boundaries of the profession of journalism itself, with evidence suggesting that such solidarity and resistance practices through cooperation can take place even within trans-national citizen journalism networks (Luo and Fang, 2024).

Peace journalism explores workable options which could give peace a chance, therefore the choices journalists make while covering conflicts tend inescapably either to expand or contract the space available for society at large to imagine and work towards peaceful outcomes to conflicts (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005). Governments and officials usually know how to create facts for journalists to report. Most governments think of their actions and statements as part of a 'media strategy' which cannot be separated from the business of running their country's affairs. This particular strategy usually creates a 'feedback loop,' as journalists influence the kind of facts likely to be provided for them to report in the future, so they are prepared to 'report the facts' as parties thought they would, and they provide an incentive to these and other parties to provide similar facts on another occasion. Journalists, their sources and their audiences are counterparts in a feedback loop of cause and effect (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005), so they have to take more responsibility and think about the consequences of the report. In other words, the peace journalism model encourages journalists to play a more active role in the problems or conflicts (Ersoy, 2010). According to peace journalism, reporters should approach conflict in a different way, not only reporting facts, but also providing solutions

and suggestions in order to solve the situation of crisis. As stated by Galtung (2003), peace journalism tries to depolarise by showing the black and white of all sides, and to de-escalate by highlighting peace and conflict resolution as much as violence. Therefore, truth holds for all sides, just like exploration of the conflict formation and giving voice to all, it is a 'journalism of attachment' to all actual and potential victims (Galtung, 2003). The task of the peace journalist is to highlight positive points, stimulate dialogue, not signal any agreement or disagreement (Galtung, 2003). Empathy plays a very important role in peace journalism, while reporters usually strive for objectivity and balance, trying to put themselves on the opposite side. That argument goes that publication/broadcasting in this way will not only prevent the violence between the parties, it will facilitate the understanding of each side. So, journalists could contribute to solving the problems before they grow or start (Khasib and Ersoy, 2017).

Abdul-Nabi (2017) strongly believes that so-called alternative media are a fundamental part of peace journalism and cites the Syrian conflict as a paradigmatic example. In Syria, a group of young, independent journalists in the diaspora founded SouriaLi online radio in which they broadcast shows and programmes full of raw stories about Syrian people and their daily life, the implications of conflict, poverty, food prices, drama, music, culture, and sarcasm. In other words, while it is very challenging to change from within and reform the mainstream media, social media have no such restrictions and limitations in relation to peace journalism. Peace journalism can also be developed to present an alternative way of understanding war and conflict. It thus has an inherent mechanism of expressing, criticising, and questioning the conventional methods of journalism. It has also introduced ethical principles to journalism as it challenges isolation of journalism from society, corruption, and unhealthy social paradigms. It brought forward the notion that some news is not made behind closed doors, but rather made in a fair, transparent, honest, balanced, and qualified manner. In summary, with peace journalism, journalists are asked to play a more active role towards the issues that interest the community (Khasib and Ersoy, 2017).

Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) pointed out some of the most important characteristics of peace journalism, underlining that it is very important to avoid portraying a conflict as a war consisting of only two parties, while it is imperative to disaggregate the two parties into many smaller groups, pursuing many goals. Invisible effects of the conflict and

tracing consequences and effects for people in other places are also really important in producing news and reports based on the paradigms of peace journalism.

On the other hand, Pineda (2019) affirmed that in some cases journalism should go hand in hand with the work of advocacy. Vine (2017) also portrayed the role of *advocacy journalism*, as it sometimes serves the public interest more ably than mainstream media, however, it must maintain standards of factual accuracy and thoroughness, in order to gain public credibility. As stated by CNN's Christiane Amanpour, reporters should certainly be fair, but it doesn't mean treating the perpetrators on an equal basis with their victims or drawing balance where no balance exists (McLaughlin, 2016). Amanpour has attacked the culture of moral equivalence where journalism seems uncomfortable with identifying a victim and an aggressor (McLaughlin, 2016). Advocacy journalism could sometimes be mistaken for activism and portraying journalism as activism is considered a form of bias, since activists and advocacy groups make it blatantly clear which side of an argument they support (Pineda, 2019). However, in some cases, journalism and activism have found a way to cooperate in reporting and undercover facts, as journalists should be considered as advocates for the right to the truth.

Wade (2011) underlined that under conditions of consensus, reporters can act much like activists. In sum, media actors build consensus and, once they do, they can work with activists to advocate for public policies. Without consensus, reporter advocacy would have seemed inappropriate. By choosing frames that facilitate consensus, journalists can engage in advocacy and still make claims to objectivity (Wade, 2011). Journalists, of course, do not have complete freedom to create an impression of consensus or contention. When an issue is being newly constructed as a social problem relevant to a heretofore uninformed constituency, and if challengers are relatively weak, journalists can play an important role in constructing a social problem as either a contentious social movement or a consensus-based cause (Wade, 2011).

Bell (1998) addressed the topic of advocacy from a slightly different perspective, defining the concept of *journalism of attachment*, placing emphasis on the moral duty to tell the truth, however inconvenient, over and above the professional obligation to be impartial. The debate about journalism of attachment started in the 1990s, when Martin Bell, reporting about the Bosnian war, advocated a more committed moral

approach to reporting the conflict (McLaughlin, 2016). As a broadcast journalist, Bell (1998) still believed in impartiality and reporting facts, but he also discussed the meaning of objectivity and its existence in the midst of a brutal war or humanitarian calamity. Bell (1998) therefore rejected 'bystander journalism' and stated that the reporter should not take sides but he must be aware of the moral ground on which he is operating. Veteran war reporter Michael Nicholson (1993), also wrote about the difficulty to be objective in situations of war or humanitarian crisis, stating that he did not believe in so-called objectivity, as it is possible to report the facts and being close to the truth still showing a commitment and emotional anguish. So, journalism of attachment is an engaged journalism, which bears witness to horrors and deliberately stirs the consciences of the mass audience and of public men and women who have the power and command the resources to put a stop to them (Lloyd, 2004). On the other hand, Hume (1997) defined journalism of attachment as self-righteous, allowing journalists to act as judge and jury and to promulgate the morally correct line, undermining their role as objective and impartial reporters.

Another important form of journalism is *solutions journalism*. McIntyre (2017) focused on Solutions Journalism as a journalistic means to mitigate some harmful effects of negative and conflict-based news. In Benesch's (1998) early recognition of solutions journalism, she defined it as 'reporting on efforts that seem to succeed at solving particular social problems. Solutions journalism is therefore based on response, which is the fundamental part of this particular journalistic form. Solution-oriented stories are meant to be presented critically, which means the responses (and those involved) are thoroughly investigated to keep the story from giving blind praise to a response (Bansal and Martin, 2015). Solutions journalism is strictly connected to other forms of journalism previously described, such as peace and advocacy journalism. However, solutions journalism presents particular characteristics and it is strongly linked to the agenda setting theory, which predicts how the salience of a topic and its attributes transfer from the media to the reader (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar and Llamas, 2000). The more the media talk about something and how the media talk about it will be retained and reflected in the audience's mind (McIntyre, 2018). Solutions journalism can also be situated within a similar, but more specific category called constructive journalism, which 'involves applying positive psychology techniques to news work in an effort to

create more productive, engaging stories while holding true to journalism's core functions' (McIntyre, 2015: p. 9).

Many journalists feel excitement about solutions journalism and liken it to investigative reporting but with an extra step (Lough and McIntyre, 2018). They think most topics are suited for a solutions approach, but those with less complexity are more conducive, as well as topics relating to social issues. Objectivity is still a challenge, as it is in journalism itself, but journalists think it can be addressed through rigorous reporting and strong supporting evidence (Lough and McIntyre, 2018). In their news production habits, journalists shift their thought processes first, and let that guide their routines while working on a solutions story. Finally, it takes more than just the journalist to facilitate the process: management must be on board and commit the resources necessary (Lough and McIntyre, 2018).

These alternative forms of journalism have expanded the concept of conflict journalism providing different perspectives and lenses through which journalists report wars. Conflict coverage could therefore be approached using different forms of journalism by different media actors.

In the case of the Syrian conflict, as my research will show, these alternative forms of journalism could be recognised in the news stories published by different news outlets, which were key in reporting the Syrian war. In fact, in the journalistic coverage of the Syrian conflict it is possible to recognise various principles, concepts and specific traits that characterised the alternative forms of conflict journalism listed above. Furthermore, the different ways this conflict was covered along with the various approaches chosen by media workers to report the war, highlighted the changes occurring in conflict journalism. Conflict journalism appears to be evolving as a concept, whose borders are becoming more blurred and alternative forms of journalism can also be recognised under the bigger umbrella of war reporting. In my study I chose to analyse the Syrian conflict trying to identify a new form of conflict journalism which might be able to gather different journalistic forms that could integrate the coverage of conflicts and crises in order to provide a more complete journalistic package.

1.9 Mediatisation of war

The rise of these different forms of journalism is also due to the continuous evolution of the relationship between media and war.

Since the early 2000s, this relationship has greatly changed as pointed out by Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010). In fact, diffused wars¹⁵ create an immediate connection between the trinity of government, military and public, therefore media themselves are weaponised and temporal horizons as well as geopolitics of warfare are transformed (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010). According to this concept, modern war cannot be fully understood without taking into account the results of changes in communication technology, available to news and citizen media. These are becoming part of the practices of warfare to the point that the conduct of war cannot be understood unless one carefully accounts for the role of media in it (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010).

The mediatisation of war matters because perceptions have become vital. Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) focus on the perceptions of the audience who can offer support to a war, of the government trying to justify a war, and of those in the military themselves who are trying to perceive and understand themselves exactly what is happening as war is waged. On the other hand, in recent years the concept of mediatised war has evolved still further. As explained by Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010), who have particularly studied this phenomenon, the embedding of digital content enabled more of war and its consequences to be recorded, archived, searched, and shared – war's far deeper mediatisation. An unprecedented sense of chaos and flux beset both those conducting war and mainstream media organisations used to having a monopoly on its reporting. Content seemed to emerge from nowhere, effects had no causes (Devji, 2005), and uncertainty reigned. Therefore, the centre has adapted and come back even stronger. The mainstream is the media ecology. User-generated content and its chaotic dynamics 'out there' have been absorbed and appropriated. Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) have then identified two different phases of war mediatisation. The first one roughly identified as the 'broadcast era' (Merrin, 2008) and the second one, defined by the advent of the Web 2.0 and a new media ecology (Cottle, 2006), where the new media

¹⁵ Diffused war refers to a new paradigm of war in which the mediatization of war makes possible more diffuse causal relations between action and effect, creating greater uncertainty for policymakers in the conduct of war (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010: p. 15).

greatly shifted the media imaginary. Then a third phase has been identified, it focuses on the new role of professional journalists. They verify emerging online content, sifting the data mass produced by citizen-producers, so that those traditional news sources can buy that verified content and blame any mistakes on the wire agencies. In the third phase of mediatisation the now-subverted citizen, whether image-uploading eyewitness or Twitter (now X) commentator, is one who is more fully integrated into and appropriated by the mainstream; categorised, commodified, processed.

On the other hand, Carruthers (2011) also argued that the examination and interpretation work of the media about war is never done, as in times of crisis media usually seek to refer to past wars in present day contexts as sources of inspiration, warning or analogy.

However, in the last decades, due to the War on Terror and the War in the Digital Age (Carruthers, 2011), journalists find themselves in a difficult position, as Western journalism usually struggles in a psychological campaign in order to win 'hearts and minds' in its fight against terrorism (Carruthers, 2011). In addition, given the rapid proliferation of new digital media in their multiple manifestations, and the unmistakable salience of Arabic-language media, especially in the Middle-East, Western journalism has now to face a new challenge in trying to control these new media actors (Carruthers, 2011). In this particular case, due to the large amount of information which the audience can access, states and governments find it more and more difficult to exercise control over the media. As affirmed by Carruthers (2011), states exercise power over the media through multiple forms of persuasion, co-optation and coercion, but as these increasingly unpopular wars suggest, policy elites do not always succeed in moulding opinion in the desired direction for the desired duration. It is clear that there are stable connections between the media system and the political system. According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), who have studied the different Western media models, there is a set of four principal dimensions for comparing media systems: the structure of media markets, including, particularly, the degree of developments of the mass circulation press; the degree and form of political parallelism; the development of journalistic professionalism; and the degree and form of state intervention in the media system. Following this pattern, Hallin and Mancini (2004) have therefore identified three main media models: the Liberal Model, the Democratic Corporatist Model and the Polarized

Pluralist Model. The relationship among media and political systems is always changing and evolving, therefore political system characteristics are manifested more or less directly in media structures (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). It is impossible to objectively analyse the different interactions between media and policy, as they are usually influenced by technologic and economic factors. In addition, Hallin and Mancini's model can mainly be adapted to Western countries, while the rise of media actors in the Middle East could possibly lead to completely different media structures in these countries, where journalism is strongly influenced not only by political, technological and economic factors, but also by national conscience and activism. The fast-paced evolution of war reporting, in these particular areas, has also transformed and favoured the rise of key figures in the world of conflict journalism.

As media organisations have constantly to rethink their strategies about reporting in conflict zones (Murrell, 2018), stringers, local reporters or correspondents have assumed more and more important roles (Borpujari, 2019), as well as other players, such as accidental and citizen journalists, as identified by Allan (2013), whose voices have gradually become a 'source of information rather than only experience or emotion' (Chouliaraki, 2015: p. 106). Markham (2012) also added that the rise of local war reporters has changed conflict journalism, as they are usually more culturally prepared to understand all the possible angles of the conflict and able to act more easily in the field, helping to create a more inclusive journalism that no longer relies upon official sources or stereotypes (Sacco, 2017). This is mainly linked to technological developments, including the use of social media and blogs, starting from the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Allan and Matheson, 2009), as a means to share and spread news and information. Therefore, the digital age has contributed to the creation of a journalistic environment with stories being generated by a multiplicity of diverse actors in a participatory and interactive way, where professional journalists usually play a role as verifiers and gatekeepers (Martin 2017). Kampf and Liebe (2013) have identified two major factors that have largely contributed to the rise of citizen journalism in war zones:

- The accessibility of digital media
- The changes in warfare itself, as contemporary warzones have moved into the urban spaces, placing civilians in the heart of conflict, unlike the majority of the

conflicts fought during the 20th century, with their clear-cut distinction between war zones and home fronts.

In addition, as underlined by Chouliaraki (2015), contemporary war relies on digital platforms, where a citizen voice, in the form of tweets or emails, appears alongside that of the journalist. This voice is treated as a source of information rather than only experience or emotion and consists of visual testimony, in mobile phone snapshots or videos, as well as linguistic accounts. In fact, citizen eyewitness imagery has acquired a recognised role in crisis coverage. From the perspective of journalistic production, the use of citizen material has first been justified by the advantages that it provides in facilitating newsgathering in the case of restricted access (Williams, Wahl-Jorgensen and Wardle, 2011). Crisis and war news have always had the power to mobilise audiences and attract the attention over determined situations, allowing identification, triggering body sensations and even facilitating a sense of attachment. This is the main reason citizen and local correspondents are attracting so much audience, as the emotional impact of citizen imagery is created from the experience of being able to view news events from the perspective of those affected or those directly witnessing the events (Ahva and Hellman, 2015). The great contribution made by ordinary citizens offering their firsthand reports, digital photographs, camcorder video footage, mobile telephone snapshots or audio clips is helping to reconfigure the geometry of informational power in the 'network society'. The online reporting of everyday possesses the capability to bring and bear alternative perspectives, context and ideological diversity to news reports, providing Internet users with the means to hear distant voices otherwise being marginalised, if not silenced altogether, across uneven mediascapes (Allan, Sonwalkar and Carter, 2007). Western journalists' routine, everyday choices about what to report had to adapt to this new situation, taking into account the great contribution of local correspondents and citizen journalists, therefore facing the challenge to approach new sources of information.

1.10 The changing nature of sourcing

Journalists historically favoured the élite (Gans, 1979b) as authoritative sources possessing certain 'qualifications' or 'credentials' that allow them to speak to news workers and be quoted in the news. These 'qualifications' include the source holding a position of power – whether economic or social – and being a representative of a major

societal institution (Ewart, Cokely, Coats, 2004). As stated by Gans (1979b), sources attempt to manage the content and direction of news, and journalists try to get the angle and information needed. Journalists are increasingly relying on social media for information, but they usually report the need to verify information gathered from social media sources as only a small percentage of journalists indicated social media are a reliable tool for sourcing stories (Arketi Group, 2011). Journalists still prefer traditional communications and relationship-building strategies, such as email, telephone and in-person meetings (Gillis and Johnson, 2015). Therefore, journalists have a clear preference for citing sources that occupy positions of power within formal institutions or that represent influential segments of society (Denham, 1997), however recent developments in the news industry have potentially profound consequences for source diversity (Boczkowski, 2010). The acceleration of the news cycle, the decline in resources devoted to reporting and the shortening of the publication process may enhance the media's dependence on well-known and readily accessible sources (Lews, Williams, Franklin, 2008).

Usually, news outlets prefer to rely on mainstream sources, choosing sources that are reliant on expertise, authoritativeness and legitimacy (Atton and Wickenden, 2005), in fact, journalists acted as gatekeepers who determined news agendas based on their sense of professional expertise (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). However, the rise of the internet along with social media has made it more convenient for reporters to access communities. Historically, few journalists have effectively used those tools to diversify sourcing (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton, 2012).

In fact, thanks to the visibility gained by alternative sources, journalists have emphasised eyewitness accounts and community-voice blogs (Atton, 2002b), effectively making non-élites 'reporters of their own experiences, struggles and lives' and created journalism in which 'source and writer become one' (Atton and Wickenden, 2005, p.349). However, while social media have become a relevant sourcing tool for journalists, mainly as a monitoring tool and as a source of inspiration, this has hardly changed the relationships with actors (Van Leuven, Kruijemeier, Lecheler and Hermans, 2018). Therefore, the journalists' relationship with their sources has gradually changed, also thanks to the technological development that forced them to adapt: 'journalists are increasingly convinced of the merits of adapting their practices to newer technological

capabilities' (Ekdale, Singer, Tully, Harmsen, 2015: p. 939). As stated on the website Cision¹⁶ (2017), social media are now fully embedded as technological infrastructures in journalistic work routines, therefore journalists had to face the challenge of selecting new sources. In fact, the interplay between journalists and sources is a significant factor in affecting what and who makes the news. Sources help to shape how events and issues are reported, influencing the public's understanding of the world (Hermida, Lewis, Zamith, 2014).

On the other hand, journalists are still hesitant to use quotations and multimedia (photographs or video) from social media sources. They prefer to make contact with sources through more traditional means, however, they use social media to find credible sources (Gillis and Johnson, 2015). It is clear that with more information providers at hand, access to an increased number of locals around the globe is secured (even if an organisation has no staff on the ground). This does enhance the opportunities to find stories, add viewpoints and perspective to the narratives provided in every day news practice (Van Leuven, Heinrich, Deprez, 2015).

In conflict zones such as Syria, access to the warzones and even to the possible sources working on the ground has been a problem since the start of the war. In today's 24/7 news cycle, online sources offer an effective, quick, convenient and cheap way for journalists to gather information on developing stories, and they increasingly also trigger news stories (Kruikemeier and Lecheler, 2016). Journalists search for eyewitness footage shot with smart phones, or embed posts from social media in live blogs to stay on top of what is happening from minute to minute (Van Leuven, Kruikemeier, Lecheler, Hermans, 2018). These sources provide useful and sometimes even crucial information, which can be collected and offers fast insights into a critical situation, without even being on the ground. But, in order to avoid fake news and manipulation, the verification process and the gate-keeping process still play a fundamental role in these situations, as explained later in this chapter. However, it seems, from a journalistic perspective, that users as news sources are a marginal phenomenon, most likely as a consequence

¹⁶ Cision is a comprehensive communications platform which published annual Social journalism studies: https://www.cision.com/content/dam/cision/Resources/white-papers/SJS_Interactive_Final2.pdf

both of what is actually asked for from the professionals and what is desirable from an audience point of view (Bergstrom, 2010).

In Syria, Syrian and Western journalists had to rely on the contribution of different media actors, due to the limited access to the country, such as diaspora journalists who continue their truth-telling mission, support the human rights initiatives, provide unfiltered independent news to local, diasporic, and international audiences, and de-westernise the representations of their homeland conflicts by diversifying the coverage perspectives (Balasundaram, 2019). Even before the conflict, Syria was a closed society due to the strong state control on mass media (Pies and Madanat, 2011). News media had been totally under state control until 2001 when private newspapers were allowed to operate, while private radio and television stations had to wait another five years, operating is still risky as suspensions and closing down of media outlets are common (Pies and Madanat, 2011). News broadcasting is only allowed for governmental radio and television stations (Pies and Madanat, 2011). As Syria was considered for about ten years to be one of the most dangerous places to report from owing to the incessant nature of the conflict, airstrikes, and jihadists group activities (Johnston, 2017), networked journalism allowed access to different sources, whilst enhancing collaboration among diaspora journalists and citizen journalists and activists reporting locally on the ground (Beckett and Mansell, 2008). Many international broadcasters and diaspora journalists depended mainly on the citizen journalists and activists in Syria to cover domestic news including Al Jazeera whose 46.3% of broadcast footage about Syria came from opposition citizen journalists (Khasib and Ersoy, 2017), and the New York Times which started breaking news blogs as a journalistic tool (Wall and Zahed, 2015a). When confronted with only limited access to war zones, journalists must consult new sets of sources, (Gonen and Hoxha, 2019). The availability of alternative sources of information, such as citizens and fighters, emerged from the development of digital media (Gonen, 2018). Technological developments empowered journalists to reach distant sources and reduced their dependence on official sources (Tumber, 2019). In addition, journalists often use the practice of inter-media citation to locate story ideas, breaking news, and news sources, and to check the reliability of other media sources (Gonen and Hoxha, 2019).

1.11 Verification

The great challenge for Western journalists in integrating this journalistic material into their news packages raises the issue of verification.

Recent research has uncovered that using online sources, such as Twitter (now X) or YouTube in a responsible manner requires skills that may go beyond those most journalists possess, especially technological knowledge and expertise. Some media have reacted with new verification strategies online, and academic research is working on developing verification tools that may be used by journalists online (Kruikemeier and Lecheler, 2016). As stated by Diakopoulos, De Choudhury and Naaman (2012), while greatly expanding the range of available sources, the digital environment thus confronts journalists with challenges related to filtering and assessing the authority, trustworthiness and veracity of sources. These challenges are accentuated during emergencies where the production pace is faster, some activity increases, and trustworthy information is crucial.

The verification of sources and information, despite some great developments and achievements, still represents the main problem with User-Generated Content (UGC). Even if it has been verified, UGC still raises issues about its integration in professional news. Although UGC is increasingly used in online news, its integration has generally decreased recipients' perceptions of both the reliability of the sources used, and the correctness and verifiability of the presented information (Grosser, Hase and Wintterlin, 2019). Overall, it appears that journalism's trustworthiness will more likely suffer than benefit from an increased use of UGC, regardless of its specific mode of integration (Grosser, Hase and Wintterlin, 2019). UGC has gradually become a great resource to use in professional newsrooms in order to cover crisis events, or the aftermath of events happening where there is limited or no journalistic presence. Western media organisations and agencies have started to develop new strategies to verify UGC, going back to its sources and deeply analysing the content proposed. In terms of relationships and workflows, journalists curating UGC are informing colleagues about what should be used, labelled and processed. Special teams or desks are being created, even in the BBC newsroom, in order to verify UGC content and prepare it in order to be included into news and reports (Johnston, 2018). Numerous gatekeepers still intervene in news content production, adding modifications based on the traditional journalism norms of,

for example, content selection and editing. In addition, due to the rise of new online media platforms and social media, gatekeepers had to face the growth of the amount of news stories and information available to the public, selecting the news stories that they were interested in and that they believed they could make a meaningful contribution to, and added to the existing mainstream coverage. This is a distinctly different approach described as 'gate-watching' (Bruns 2005): the continuous observation of material that passes through the output gates of news outlets and other sources, in order to identify relevant such material for publication and discussion in the gate-watcher's own site.

In the case of the Syrian civil war, the experience of citizen journalism and local reporters could be seen through a completely different lens, as the war there has provided a certain continuity to these media actors, that could actually keep producing content, while people who witness catastrophic events usually produce content just because they are present, stopping to share what they have witnessed as soon as this particular event reaches its end (Wall and Zahed, 2015a).

1.12 Coverage of the Syrian conflict

In the case of the Syrian conflict, journalists could choose to focus on conflicts between the government and the rebels or between various international stakeholders, the human-interest stories of those involved in the crisis, the economic consequences of the crisis, the morality of the actions of the actors involved in the crisis (Cozma and Kozman, 2015). Syria's media news system was characterised as a pop-up news ecology, a term used to capture the speed with which it has appeared and its contingent nature (Wall and Zahed, 2015b). Heinrich (2011) defined it as network journalism, a form of news with particular importance at the intersections of information nodes between amateurs and professionals. In the spring of 2011 as citizens protested against President Bashar al Assad's government, the state media refused to give them a voice, and instead labelled them terrorists and armed gangs who needed to be eliminated, while demonstrators attempted to document the nascent protest movement themselves (Lesch 2012). Syrian citizen journalists took advantage of the built-in networking structure of social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, all of which are key nodes in global information networks. Before the Syrian civil war, the country had known only one tightly controlled

media system and its citizens failed to gain a fair hearing in the Syrian professional media. Thus, ordinary Syrians took up their cell phones and video cameras, opened their YouTube, Facebook and Twitter accounts, and began reporting the story, forming an entirely new pop-up news system which was able to connect successfully to global news networks (Wall and Zahed, 2015a).

However, when journalists were forced to leave Syria, the media coverage of the war was mainly provided by citizen journalists (Salama, 2012). Local correspondents continued to gain experience in journalism as the war progressed and through their collaboration with foreign news agencies some of them have reached the status of 'war correspondent.' As Taylor and Yussuf (2017) reported, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting IWPR started to conduct training for citizen journalists in Syria to help them develop the basic journalistic skills to report war stories, finding a balance between activism and objectivity. In addition, professional journalists such as Barnard (2018) have described their own experience in collaborating with local Syrian stringers in order to produce combined content which they wouldn't be able to collect:

"We've combined online and in-person contact, meeting people online and seeing them in person later, or using social media to quietly keep in touch after meeting inside the country. Using Skype or WhatsApp videos or photos, we can witness what a person is going through in real time. We can also ask them to show us their surroundings or send images of shrapnel or documents or locations, to bolster or debunk claims. We use reverse image search to make sure that photos and videos being shared online are not recycling old incidents. And with the help of colleagues, we can use geolocation to verify the time and location of photos and videos." (The New York Times, July 2018)

The rise of local contributors is also due to the policy of cutting the cost of foreign correspondents who are becoming more and more expensive. Local journalists, stringers and even NGOs increasingly offer an access point and are often content providers for journalists (Are, 2018). Murrell (2018) thinks that news organisations and media agencies have to rethink their strategies about reporting from conflict zones. In fact, due to the changes in which war reporting is involved, stringers and locals have come to play a fundamental role in reporting about conflicts and war areas. As reported by Katz (2016) stringers know their towns and cities, they have better access than

outsiders, as local people trust them and they speak the language and don't inspire suspicion both among the locals and the rebel fighters. This is why, for example, Agence France-Presse has a significant stringer presence in Syria, in both government- and opposition-controlled areas (Katz, 2016). The particular journalistic and logistical challenges of covering this conflict have prodded everyone to use basic technology in new and different ways. From the start, journalists have combined online and in-person contact, meeting people online and seeing them in person later, or using social media to quietly keep in touch after meeting inside the country. Using Skype or WhatsApp videos or photos, professional journalists and Western news agencies can witness what a person is going through in real time (Barnard, 2018). As Barnard (2018) stated, the use of reverse image search has become a very interesting tool to verify that photos and videos being shared online were not recycling old incidents.

In the Syrian conflict activists and citizens have successfully distributed an increasing number of citizen-produced photos and footage of mass protests and regime murders to a global audience (Baker, 2013). According to Cockburn (2013), the Syrian opposition immediately built relations with international media in contraposition to the Assad regime. As observed by Khamis et. al. (2012) Assad's policy backfired on the Syrian regime so the international media relied on the Syrian activists' citizen journalism efforts to gather information about the conflict. The Syrian crisis was an issue that the United States and the Western countries were not directly involved in. In particular, the United States had more than 2,000 troops in Syria, but they were not directly involved in the conflict, therefore the media were less likely to report on individuals in episodic terms (Cozma and Kozman, 2015). The general lack of access to the Syrian ground operations might have prevented the news outlets from focusing on personal stories. Journalists mined sources as efficiently as possible, chiefly going where information is most likely to flow to them, that is, official sources, so US and international official sources dominated the coverage (Cozma and Kozman, 2015). Probably due to lack of access to ground operations, journalists were able to cover episodes of an ongoing far-reaching conflict thematically and were forced to search sources across the world, as international leaders themselves hurried to make sense of what was going on (Cozma and Kozman, 2015). So, journalists balanced officials' viewpoints with experts' opinions, combining institutionally driven reporting with enterprise reporting (Cozma and Kozman, 2015). The international media highlighted the suffering of civilians in the on-

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going war in Syria and coverage has harked back to an earlier era, recalling the style of 'attached' or advocacy journalism (Hammond, Al Nahed and McCormack, 2019). Western journalists were so preoccupied with rehabilitating the idea of liberal interventionism and giving weight to their 'moral impulse' that they saw active Western interference as inaction (Hammond, Al Nahed and McCormack, 2019).

On the other hand, using social media as an alternative press, citizen journalists, activists, revolutionary groups who were behind the protests, have been attributed with defining the narratives of the revolutions from the inside out, and in doing so, directly challenging the authority of the traditional 'primary definers', namely government figures and their information managers (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994). Although this is not the first war that foreign media have been restricted from covering on the ground, it is arguably the first war that has been so thoroughly documented by civilians and eyewitnesses, and distributed via social media (Storck, 2014). News outlets have therefore relied on citizen journalists since the beginning of the Syrian conflict. This fact was both a result of the government's refusal to interact with Western journalists, as well as a result of an orchestrated effort on the part of media activists to bring the outside world inside Syria, and ultimately to encourage a western intervention (Storck, 2014). As Storck (2014) observed, news outlets started working with Western NGOs in order to establish trustworthy working relationships with citizen journalists. This widespread availability of unfiltered reports from the ground has led to what academics referred to as 'two streams' (Storck, 2014):

1. News consumers will always have the unfiltered information that is documented and shared by witnesses and participants in an event.
2. Filtered stream takes this information and subjects it to processes of verification and interpretation.

As Jefferson (2007) states, online news consumption gives users the chance to see situations from different points of view and to evaluate and compare the information from different biases. While 'two streams' do provide an element of transparency in reporting, it is only truly effective when the audience has a prior interest, and in many cases a developed knowledge, of the events taking place (Storck, 2014). Activists developed expertise in directing amateur videos and provided digital content and information to the news outlets, so the network of Syrian activists and news media grew

stronger (Al-Ghazzi, 2014). In fact, the war's violence, in addition to restrictions imposed on news media by the Syrian regime, expanded the outsourcing of the journalistic role to citizen journalists and activists on the ground (Al-Ghazzi, 2014).

The precarious working conditions for domestic and foreign journalists severely impeded traditional news practices and made Syria stand apart from the other regional revolts (Harkin et al. 2012). Citizen-generated imagery has proved to be an invaluable source for traditional news media as a way of coping with the severe limitations imposed on on-the-ground newsgathering and reporting (Mast and Hanegreefs, 2015). When the Syrian crisis emerged as a news story on the international news media agenda, the journalistic value of the content provided by citizen journalists and media workers based on the ground exceeded the immediacy of the initial period of the conflict (Mast and Hanegreefs, 2015). The subsequent, gradual increase in professional images is primarily due to news coverage's focus shifting to the diplomatic context, as the ongoing conflict eventually became a pressing issue on the political agenda (Mast and Hanegreefs, 2015). So, professional and citizen imagery fulfil a complementary role in representing different visual framings of the Syrian war, with citizens succeeding in securing a hold on mainstream news media's 'news hole', despite elite sources and professional photojournalists reclaiming terrain (Mast and Hanegreefs, 2015). Syrian citizens, thanks to their contribution, enabled news media to be present enough to respond to what is happening as well as to remain passionate about the undermining of human dignity that accompanies war (Mast and Hanegreefs, 2015). In addition, in performing news media's role of 'human rights surveillance' (Cottle, 2011), the proximity and immediacy of citizen images tends to translate, also, in more explicit images of human suffering and death, including children (Mast and Hanegreefs, 2015). Most of these creators were not trained as reporters and had no journalism experience so they could be inconsistent and unprofessional in producing content, including blurring activism with their reporting and failing to behave ethically (Wall and Zahed, 2015a). However, as the clashes between the regime and its opponents became increasingly violent, multiple online news collection and distribution sites had been created by Syrian opposition members and some became established sources of information for audiences inside and outside of the country (Wall and Zahed, 2015a). These self-created news outlets directly challenged the government's attempt to control information circulating inside and outside of the country, offering new frames for talking about what was happening in Syria and

demonstrating how actors could speak for and about themselves (Wall and Zahed, 2015a). Some of Syria's citizen journalists showed an awareness and even a desire to conform to certain norms of Western professional journalism and they faced more basic issues around the credibility of their actual reporting, adopting the values and language of the international news media (Wall and Zahed, 2015a).

On the other hand, the Arab uprisings, particularly in Syria, demonstrate how digital media use on the ground complicates assumptions about their relation to the political and social environment, due to the local level and the multiple antagonistic, affective, and violent, aspects implicated in digital media use (Al-Ghazzi, 2014). In some cases, news organisations provided indirect or vague source citations, while leaving the unverifiable status of citizen-generated content often implicit (Mast and Hanegreefs, 2015). Moreover, the graphic nature of citizen images, together with a lack of transparency, interact with their 'emotional proximity' and with the idea that rendering citizen images "authorless" advances a sense of collectivity, fostering a global imagination (Pantti, 2013).

Along with citizen journalists, it is also important to analyse the contribution of diaspora journalists in reporting about the Syrian conflict. Diaspora journalists work outside their origin countries, whether professionals or amateurs, in international mainstream media outlets or online news portals established by exiled and independent journalists (Ogunyemi, 2015). However, they keep close connections with multiple actors in their home countries and use diverse technologies from printing presses to Facebook pages to disseminate ideas, values, and ideologies that influence the 'theatre of conflict' in their homelands (Oyeleye, 2017). The collaboration between diaspora journalists and those citizen journalists and activists who reported locally from the Syrian war zones became a precious source of information and content.

Diaspora journalists do not only focus on promoting advocacy goals and producing good journalism themselves, but they take a collective approach using their networks to support and teach other journalists working in the Syrian independent media sector by organising training workshops and media forums and developing recommendations for covering important issues such as Syrian elections (Arafat, 2021). To this end, the Syrian diaspora journalists' digital networks serve as digital transnational communities linking local and diaspora reporters, citizen journalists, and activists with audiences, social

movements, and human rights defenders not only for the newsgathering and reporting purposes but also for advocacy for transnational causes and developing the Syrian media sector (Arafat, 2021). This collaboration with political and civil society actors expands journalism beyond the professional centres of news production proposing a novel form of journalism advocacy that combines both 'journalist' and 'civic' advocacy (Russell 2016). The Syrian opposition diaspora journalists do not see a contradiction between being advocates and independent professional journalists at the same time and do not believe they risk the quality of their media work (Arafat, 2021). By identifying themselves with some of the traditional journalistic norms and values, problematising some of the normative professionalism standards especially objectivity and impartiality, and introducing novel practices and collaborations with new actors, Syrian diaspora journalists promote a hybrid journalistic culture (Porlezza and Arafat 2021) that serves the diasporic context offering 'new forms of journalistic truth-telling' (Baym 2016: p. 1).

This scenario could also lead to a new kind of hybrid journalism, due to the collaboration between different media actors and journalists, as well as the content produced (Wall and Zahed, 2015a). However, this possibility had been already experimented with in the past, as before the current war in Syria, a generation of war reporters had grown up with the embedding system in Iraq and Afghanistan (Tumber and Palmer, 2004).

1.13 Conclusion

In conclusion, the Syrian civil war is a paradigmatic example of how war reporting is going through a changing process that could possibly lead to the rise of new forms of conflict journalism and could also lead to reconsideration of the concept of professional journalism itself. My research aims to contribute to analysis of the role of stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters in reporting about the Syrian war.

The work of these media actors has been described and studied in previous research. However, the focus of my study is to analyse not only the nature of their work in reporting conflict but also to investigate whether they perceive themselves as journalists, as being recognised in the journalistic world, or whether they have a different idea about what it is to be a journalist.

My research aims to investigate whether these media actors tried to follow traditional journalistic standards and ethics, conforming their work to the expectation of Western

news outlets or were caught up in the events of the Syrian conflict and therefore decided to cover it, pushed by different factors, including activism, economic imperatives, humanitarian causes, or exposing war crimes. In addition, many of them founded their own news outlets, devising their own guidelines, agendas, ethics and standards, which could be different from the traditional ones: could they therefore be excluded from the journalistic field?

Clearly their contribution has been key to reporting about a complicated and extremely protracted conflict. But what is the nature of their work, their collaboration with foreign correspondents and news outlets; what are their own ways of practising journalism and covering the conflict? And has this significantly changed the concept of war reporting, previously based almost exclusively on the work of war correspondents and professional journalists?

Chapter 2 - Methodology

2.1 Introduction

In my study I decided to analyse the characteristics of the work of Syrian media actors, including the nature of their work and the challenges faced in reporting about the war. In addition, I wanted to investigate their journalistic identity along with the changes that are occurring in conflict journalism.

My research draws on a mixed methodology built on news framing analysis, sourcing analysis and semi-structured interviews in order to address the research questions and gather the data needed. A major advantage of mixed methods research is the ability to gain a rich, complete picture of the phenomenon under investigation, usually through the triangulation of data obtained through different qualitative sources with descriptive and quantitative data. The careful combination of both approaches can allow the research to examine a problem from a range of complementary angles (Mackey and Bryfonski, 2018).

The initial idea was to rely on semi-structured interviews with stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters who worked in the field in Syria, as well as news agencies' editors or producers, approaching my research without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis, as this method contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002).

However, as I progressed with my research, I realised that a mixed methodology that included some form of content analysis could provide a more complete picture of my case study. I decided that news framing analysis was most suitable for my project. In fact news framing analysis allowed me to identify the perspectives of journalists reporting about the conflict. These angles could be intentionally injected in the stories published, due to the influence of propaganda, activism or news outlets' agenda, or their presence in the articles could be unintentional and implicit, due to cultural, social, political or geographical factors. As the journalistic coverage of the Syrian conflict mainly relied on the work of local media actors working for foreign news outlets or

collaborating with international journalists, news framing analysis allowed me to identify their angles and frames emerging from the stories they published and shared. This method enabled me to analyse the characteristics of reporting about the Syrian war and how it was framed across the different news outlets (RQ1). In addition, it supported me in investigating the challenges faced by the media actors in covering the war, as well as their contribution and role in reporting about the conflict.

While working on my pilot study, I realised that an additional sourcing analysis would help make frame choices easier.

Sourcing analysis was fundamental to the news framing analysis, allowing me to highlight the choices of sources selected by the news outlets and then to pin them down as markers for the framing analysis, as well as to deeply analyse the published stories from a different perspective. But I did not use sourcing analysis solely as a tool to identify markers to be used in news framing analysis. The sources selected in the stories analysed were also key to investigating the agenda and the interests of the news outlets that published those stories. Sourcing analysis supported me not only in pinning down the different factors that influenced the ways facts were reported, but also in analysing the reason different news outlets selected specific sources for different stories. The selection of sources was also fundamental to identify the context and the tone of the articles, which also played an important role in pinning down the frames. Therefore, I decided to consider sourcing analysis separately from news framing analysis. It informs the latter, but it also allowed me to analyse other elements that were key in answering RQ1 and RQ2.

Interviews provided me with a direct insight to the work of stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists on the ground, and their relationship with the news outlets they were working with. Furthermore, interviewees allowed me to investigate their experiences, their motivation and their methods of covering the Syrian conflict, as well as their ideas about journalism and their own perspective about their identity and relationship to the journalistic field.

Stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists stepped up as the main media actors, and importance has gradually grown. Since 2004, news agencies, along with other news organisations and outlets, have started to publish stories using the material provided by these media actors. However, in Syria their contribution and their role in reporting about the conflict quickly grew as they usually had direct access to the warzones. News agencies therefore had the function of verifying these stories and at the same time, they had to adapt to this new way of reporting war - focusing on the material published on social media, acting as gatekeepers and closely working with stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters. As the boundaries of the journalistic field become more blurred, I focused on the central role played by these media actors.

2.2 Research questions

The empirical research set out to answer the following questions:

- RQ1 What are the key characteristics of reporting about the Syrian civil war?
 - How is the Syrian civil war framed across a diverse range of news agency and media outlets?
 - How does analysis of the selectivity of sources used in media reports reveal the underlying influences shaping news framing?
- RQ2 Who are the media actors relaying information about the conflict and what challenges do they face?
 - How do they contribute to the coverage of the conflict and what is their role?
- RQ3 How do these media actors perceive their identity and how do Western news outlets perceive them?

2.3 Mixed methodology

The topic of my research project is complex as it approaches different aspects of the journalistic world. It analyses them through different lenses, focusing in particular on the rise of Syrian media actors and trying to highlight changes that might have occurred in war reporting. According to Willis (2014: p.14), single case study research ‘provides a nuanced, empirically rich, holistic account of specific phenomena’. My intention was to

analyse this specific case study from different angles and through different lenses, integrating a mixed research methodology.

2.4 News framing analysis and timeframes

I chose news framing analysis to approach the first empirical part of my research. Regarding the journalistic world, frame analysis plays a fundamental role in identifying the different frames and angles through which news stories are offered to the public. News organisations choose how to package their stories in understandable ways; in so doing, they have to balance remaining faithful to the frames used by their sources with simultaneously accounting for news values (e.g. 'balanced' coverage), while sometimes injecting their own unique perspectives (D'Angelo and Kuypers, 2010).

In fact, sources frame topics to make information interesting and palatable to journalists, whom they need to communicate information to wider publics. Journalists need sources' frames to make news, inevitably adding or even superimposing their own frames in the process (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Kuypers, 2006).

I intended to approach my research mainly using content analysis. I therefore started by analysing the different themes that the news outlets covered in the articles they published as well as the focus of the media actors involved in the coverage of the conflict. It immediately became clear that by covering the conflict, stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists were influenced by different factors related to propaganda, activism, policy, culture, but also by the standards, guidelines and agendas of news outlets. In fact, topics refer to subjects or events being reported, while frames are specific ways in which those topics are presented or interpreted.

From my initial general reading of the news stories that I selected for analysis, I identified and focused on four main angles or perspectives:

- Syrian Coalition angle: greatly influenced by activism, asking for support in its fight to establish itself and to be recognised and acknowledged by the international community
- Assad and Syrian government perspective: influenced by government's propaganda, pointing at the war against Syrian Rebels as a conflict against

terrorism. It focuses on rebuilding the country and restoring the previous political situation.

- Western perspective about conflicts: it follows the Western journalistic paradigms about objectivity and reporting war, through the work of stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters based in the country. The main focus is about reporting the main event of the war and analysing the approach of the international community to the conflict.
- Humanitarian angle: it focuses on the humanitarian issue and the challenges UN organisations, NGOs, as well as refugees and civilians have to face in a country at war.

I then realised that a news framing analysis would actually provide a richer contribution to my study. As stated at the outset of this thesis by Sigal (2016), the Syrian civil war is the most documented war, but the least understood, mainly due to the complexity of the conflict along with the challenges of access. Therefore, I changed my methodological approach, realising that a fuller news framing analysis would not only identify themes, but also the main political, sociological, activist, propaganda and cultural influences that might emerge in the stories published. I therefore used the main themes and angles I was able to identify during my initial methodological approach as the basis from which to look for frames.

While some frames are set deliberately, it is important to bear in mind that all media and news involve and provide frames sometimes subconsciously, as it might be the result of different factors influencing the media. In the case of the Syrian civil war, news framing analysis is important to explore the cultural and political content of news frames and understand 'how they draw upon a shared store of social meanings' (Reese in D'Angelo and Kuypers 2010: p. 18). Reese's (2010) idea suggests that frames manifest themselves in a number of different sites and across a number of domains. On the other hand, different definitions have focused on the idea that in framing certain aspects of the world can be communicated in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993).

This aspect is important in order to initially categorise the different influences that I was able to pin down in the stories analysed, as it helped me in the initial stage of my news framing analysis. I started to identify framing devices that would then support me in identifying the frames.

As Gamson and Modigliani (1989) pointed out, an important step in a framing analysis is the identification of framing devices, which are specific linguistic structures such as metaphors, visual icons, and catchphrases that communicate frames. In addition, the 'what' of framing (analysis) leads the researcher to examine latent aspects of the text, such as reasoning devices (Reese, 2010), as well as specific keywords that constitute the concepts underlying frames (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). In all, an analysis of the 'what' of frames emphasises the special configuration of discourse elements that articulate culture. Exploring the 'what' of frames also encourages an analysis that delves into the contextualisation of topics—social, historical, cultural—and urges the framing researcher to look closely at the particular features of the frame (Reese, 2010).

In approaching framing analysis I decided not only to focus on textual elements and markers in order to identify the different frames, but also to analyse the latent aspects of the text, especially -the tone of the story, the context and the selection of images and quotes included in the different articles.

During my analysis, I realised that the tone of the story could highlight the influence or presence of elements of activism and propaganda, that could influence the frame of the stories published by specific news outlets. The selection of sources along with the choice of quotes to be included in the articles helped me identify the tone of the stories, ranging from optimistic tones to ones of complaint, denunciation, accusation, or protest. Images were also a key factor in helping me to identify the tone of the article published, as the choice of specific images or videos to integrate into the text was another important factor contributing to set the tone of the articles analysed. Furthermore, images also were key in contextualising the stories analysed, along with the journalistic identity of the media actors or journalists reporting them and the news outlets they worked for. It was therefore important to understand the context of the stories, as this factor could actually influence the way a specific article is framed. The geographical area, the identity of the sources quoted, the context of circumstances in which specific facts

are collocated, along with other external factors, could have influenced journalists to report stories in a specific way. Furthermore, the influence of activism or propaganda, the journalistic agenda, the personal perspective, or direct involvement in the facts are also factors that needed to be considered.

It was not always possible to identify just one specific frame emerging from the analysis of articles as other frames could be present. It was therefore necessary to focus on the different framing devices and elements described above, in order to identify the dominant frame. I usually focused on framing devices, textual and lexical elements at first in order to pin down the frames present in the article analysed. If I was not able to identify the main frame, I then moved to analysis of the latent aspects of the text, such as tone, context, images, selection of sources and the quotes used. At the end of this process, I proceeded to analyse the different data gathered in order to identify the main frame emerging from the story.

I chose to focus on a particular range of time, from January 2018 to January 2020, selecting four specific time periods:

Table 1. Time periods selected

January 2018	First Turkish attacks against the Kurds, Syrian refugees returning to their homes, government's forces attacking the Syrian Coalition's strongholds, attempts by Syrian government to start the rebuilding process of the country
March 2019	Rise of the IS, increasing tensions between Turkey and the USA, fighting between Syrian Government, supported by Iran and Russia and the Syrian Coalition
September 2019	Turkish offensive and invasion of northern Syria, defeat of the IS, tensions between Kurds and Turkey
January 2020	Syrian Government attacks in the last part of Syria still controlled by the Coalition. Rebuilding process of the country before the COVID 19 crisis.

I selected the time tranches listed above because a wide range and variety of themes and angles were treated in the news stories published. In fact, I was able to analyse a large sample of different topics, from the rise and fall of the Islamic State to the Turkish invasion of northern Syria. However, I was also able to focus on different issues related to the conflict, including the rebuilding process, the relations and contrasts among the countries involved in the war, along with the humanitarian issue related to the life condition of refugees and civilians.

2.5 News outlets selected for the study

I decided to analyse the stories published by five news outlets and media operations during the time tranches taken into consideration. The news outlets selected covered the conflict from different perspectives and the themes they were more focused on differed from one another, probably influenced by different factors, mainly based on geographical location, journalistic approach and political influence.

- SANA is the official Syrian News agency, according to DW news¹⁷ and it had a clear agenda and supported Assad's government.
- Reuters is a global news agency whose guidelines and agenda follow Western journalistic standards.
- SNHR and Global Voices are organisations which support local and independent journalism in order to collect stories and insights about the situation in Syria, focusing especially on the humanitarian angle, reporting about war crimes committed by the different sides involved in the conflict and publishing stories about civilians' daily life in the war zones.
- National Coalition of Syrians is the official media channel of the Syrian Coalition; it strongly supports the Revolution and the FSA.

These five operations¹⁸ provide a range of reporting from different angles, with various external influences also exerted on their agenda and standards. The five outlets offer a more complete insight into the way this conflict was covered. In addition, I tried to select news outlets belonging to the Western and Middle Eastern world in order to be able to compare their approach to conflict journalism. SANA could be considered an official

¹⁷ <https://www.dw.com/en/a-look-at-the-syrian-arab-news-agency/a-36114086>

¹⁸ See Appendix D, pp. 315-316

news agency - it is a State controlled organisation linked to the Ministry of information whose agenda was probably influenced by propaganda and it focused on Syrian and local news. Reuters is an independent global news agency specialised in international news and finance. On the other hand, SNHR and Global Voices are smaller news agencies which support and publish the work of independent and local journalists. They therefore have less international reach and a smaller audience. SNHR mainly monitors and reports about human rights violations, while the content shared by Global voices is usually produced by citizen and local journalists. SNHR and Global Voices share the perspective of civilians and refugees caught up in the conflict, focusing on a more personal perspective of the people experiencing the war from different angles. National Coalition of Syria is first and foremost an anti-government organisation, representing the media arm of the Syrian Coalition. The breadth of information seems therefore narrower and seeks to share a Coalition perspective on events through news and reports that could be influenced by activism and propaganda. It therefore shares characteristics of an official news agency in a similar vein to SANA.

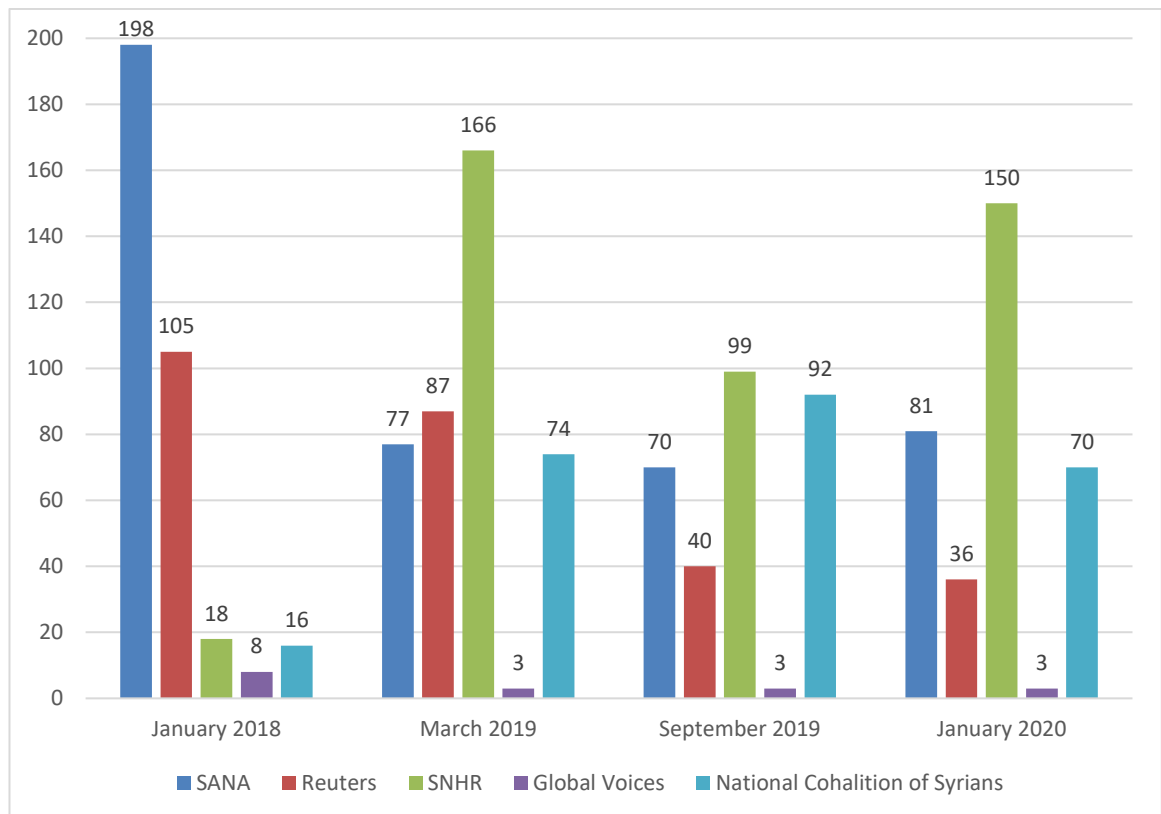
I went through the online archives of the five news outlets identified, filtering by the main topic I was interested in (Syrian civil war) in order to obtain a list of the articles that were relevant for analysis. The whole sample of articles I chose to analyse was published in English and I used the following search terms to find them:

- Syria January 2018 / March 2019 / September 2019 / January 2020
- Syria Civil War January 2018 / March 2019 / September 2019 / January 2020
- Afrin 2018 / Islamic State Syria 2019
- Syrian Conflict January 2018 / March 2019 / September 2019 / January 2020

In addition, I accessed the dedicated areas that were present on the websites of the news outlets and I manually searched in the web-archives for news stories that were published in the time tranches I selected, in order to obtain a list of features that was as complete as possible¹⁹.

¹⁹ A full numbered list of the articles is included in the thesis as Appendix F, pp.328-427

Table 2. Number of articles for each outlet in each of the four time periods selected



2.6 Pilot study and evolution of framing strategy

In order to test the efficacy of my framing methodology, I conducted a pilot study focused on January 2018²⁰, which helped identify the main frames emerging from the stories, develop a frame matrix and a coding sheet that I could use for the following analysis of the selected time tranches. In addition, while conducting the pilot study, I realised that a sourcing analysis could also support me in my research, as the selection of sources by the news agencies studied might provide important stimuli that could enrich and integrate news framing analysis and interviews.

In conducting this pilot study, I faced the first challenge of my methodological approach, namely addressing the major dividing line in news framing between deciding if the emphasis is on the ‘what’ or the ‘how’ of frames (Reese and Lewis, 2009).

The ‘what’ perspective is more frame-centric; it is concerned with frame building and involves the dissection of the content of the frame, specifically the network of concepts and the unique narrative and myths that make it work (Reese and Lewis, 2009). Tankard

²⁰ This study is included in the thesis as Appendix A

(2001) has pointed out that this approach to studying framing leads to ad hoc analyses applicable only to a particular topic or issue.

However, it is also possible to conceive of frames as strategic resources, constructed and wielded by an individual or group (including journalists), along with everything else the individual or group has at its disposal. This emphasis underlies a more process-centric, or 'how' research orientation, so frames are situated in competitive social and political environments; frames are constructed and promoted to achieve some predetermined outcome (Reese and Lewis, 2009). In these environments, elites compete against elites (Pan and Kosicki, 1993). And whereas groups may utilise frames to mobilise themselves internally and to compete against each other in the public arena (Snow and Benford, 1988), they may also, as in the case of social movements, seek to construct frames often using media that resonate with the life experiences of a target group (Snow and Benford, 2000).

I decided to approach framing analysis following the strategy explained by Reese and Lewis (2009) which is to put the 'what' before the 'how', in order to allow the researcher to start from a valuable foundation and then dig deeper to select more specific frames that are useful to the analysis.

In addition, according to De Vreese (2005), there are two main different types of frames: the episodic frame is pertinent only to specific topics or events, while thematic frames can be identified in relation to broader topics (De Vreese 2005). However, the disadvantage of an issue-specific approach focusing on episodic frames, says De Vreese (2005), is that it makes analyses difficult to generalise, compare, and use as empirical evidence for theory building.

When I first approached news framing analysis, I thought that my best option was to focus on episodic frames, as my intention was to conduct a news framing analysis about specific time periods during the Syrian civil war. I thought that features, journalistic material and news stories about this topic had specific characteristics that would help me frame them. However, by analysing the different themes and topics approached in the coverage of the Syrian civil war, I realised that generic frames were more evident

and easier to pin down as I could rely on macro categories. So, I decided to take into consideration generic frames and use a more deductive approach, as these transcend thematic limitations, as stated by De Vreese (2005). This enabled me to approach a larger range of existing frames from which to select those more pertinent to the study.

2.7 Coding basis

I started by focusing on a predetermined set of codes and generic frames drawn from previous research. In this case, I chose the study of Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992: p. 74) who identified five of the most common frames which are present in the media:

- the human impact frame - focuses on descriptions of individuals and groups affected by an issue;
- the powerlessness frame - refers to the dominance of forces over weak individuals or groups;
- the economics frame – reflects the preoccupation with profit and loss;
- the moral values frame – refers to morality and social prescriptions;
- the conflict frame - deals with the news media's game interpretation of the political world as an on-going series of contests, each with a new set of winners and losers.

By approaching news framing analysis using a deductive methodology, I realised that I could use generic frames as a basis on which to build my analysis. This method would allow me to identify more specific frames during the analysis process, by inspecting more in depth the chosen news stories and features. I therefore decided to combine deductive and inductive approaches, drawing on both existing frames and codes, but at the same time, expanding my research to episodic codes and frames that I was able to identify during my analysis of news stories and features.

However, taking a more interpretive approach can be difficult when it appears that definite categories are not immediately presenting themselves and no easy coding scheme is evident. But in sifting through texts and allowing these insights to emerge, the subtle power of large macro frames can be discerned (Reese, 2009).

At a first glance, all the five typologies of generic frames identified by Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992: p. 74) could be detected in analysing the news stories about the Syrian

conflict. Starting from this initial set of generic frames I also tried to identify more specific frames that could support me in making my analysis more accurate and complete. In fact, I had also to take into account cultural, ideological and political frames, which emerged by analysing the way the same theme or topic was treated by different news agencies. In analysing the content of different articles and features published by news agencies, I was able to highlight a mixture of inductive and deductive frames.

In this process the pilot study was fundamental in pinning down the process I had to follow in order to identify the main frames present in the stories analysed.

Some of these generic frames actually met my initial expectations. But I was also able to discern more specific frames that emerged in news stories where I would not have expected to find them. Specific frames might be a great support in a subsequent comparative analysis among the different frames identified in news stories and articles focused on the same topic. These specific themes also emerge from the material provided by reporters and they are also related to the journalistic style that was chosen by the reporter to approach a particular topic. It is therefore evident that there are a great number of general and specific factors that could influence the different news frames emerging from the analysis of a particular topic. According to Scheufele B. and Scheufele D. (2009), frames (and framing) occur in different *areas*: in the media system, in the political system, in society, and among counter publics. They also state that frames can be located at different *levels*: frames are cognitive tools for information processing (cognitive level), which emerge and change in discourse (discursive level) and manifest themselves in discourse products (textual level), such as newspaper articles or party platforms.

In addition, Scheufele B. and Scheufele D. (2009) defined the so-called journalistic approach to framing, which is concerned with cognitive frames journalists rely upon when they produce news content. According to this, similar to their audiences, journalists are susceptible to perceptual biases and are more likely to focus on information, events, or statements that match their own cognitive frames. At the same time, they are likely to pay less attention to frame-discrepant information, events, or

statements. According to Scheufele B. and Scheufele D. (2009), empirical studies in this area have examined how journalists' cognitive frames influence news production and are reflected as media frames in news reporting. Taking all this into consideration, a cognitive frame can be defined as a consistent set of cognitive schemes emerging in discourse (e.g., among the editorial staff of a newspaper) and becoming manifest in discourse products, e.g., newspaper articles (Scheufele B. and Scheufele D. 2009). In other words, framing is a function of simplifying an area of reality. But framing also means applying certain standards to these objects. Journalists, for instance, may apply different attributes to the same class of objects. News stories provide framing, as it is impossible for journalists to decide the relative importance of various facts without having some background frame in mind (Cooper, 2010).

In the first stage of my analysis, based on the deductive method, I was able to identify three main macro-themes that usually emerged in the stories under consideration:

- . Conflict
- . Political and Power
- . Humanitarian

I therefore started to look at the different angles from which these themes were approached by reporters and news outlets as well, trying to identify the frame-category for each article.

I decided to focus on the peculiarities of these specific frames emerging from the analysis of the news stories, as, according to Van Gorp et al. (2009), this is a typical approach to a framing study. He points out that part of conducting a framing analysis is to react flexibly towards possible changes that occur throughout the study (Van Gorp, 2007).

I started analysing the textual and lexical choices, identifying the main markers for each frame category. However, going through my analysis, I realised that in the same article more than one frame would often be present, and some of them did not entirely fall under the pre-set frame category.

My goal was not only to categorise the frames into a predetermined set, but also to identify new frames, as each frame provides a viewpoint that can lead to understanding

issues and to identify themes, finding, at the same time, a new starting point or underlining new issues that were not contemplated in the first place. In addition, according to Van Gorp et al. (2009), as there is an underlying meaning structure of news framing analysis, it is possible to reveal hidden structures.

I therefore realised that I could actually use latent aspects of the text in order to reveal hidden structures and identify new frames. So, I decided to also analyse the tone and the context emerging in the different articles, as well as the images used and the sources and quotes selected. After the first stage of textual analysis, looking for markers, I focused on the tone of the articles, taking into consideration the identity of the journalists or media actors that wrote them and the news outlets that published them. I therefore realised that the tone of the stories was influenced by different external factors, such as journalistic agenda, social, economic, geographical influences, propaganda, activism, direct involvement of journalists and media actors. Stories about the same topic, published by different news outlets, had a different tone.

Therefore, my initial idea to build my methodology on a deductive approach, focusing on a predetermined list, allowed me to also include a more inductive approach and build up a specific frame list to identify more specific frames, during the data gathering process.

In fact, one way of approaching news framing analysis is to understand journalistic practice by identifying the cultural notions that working journalists apply in order to frame the behaviours and motivations of news sources and to explain the origins of an issue, both of which suggest to the audience members how an event can be interpreted (Van Gorp et al., 2009).

In addition, culturally embedded frames are appealing for journalists because they are ready for use. On the basis of their narrative ingredients, it is possible to assign roles to the principal actors of an issue, specify what the problem is and who is responsible, and so forth, all of which contributes to the dramatisation and the emotional appeal of the news (Van Os, Van Gorp, and Wester, 2008). However, frames sometimes 'over problematise' an event and that adds to its endurance, but the selection of a particular frame can also contribute to the perceived solution of a problem, in the sense that the media attention for an issue decreases (Van Gorp et.al, 2009). The social and

geographical context was another key factor that I had to take into consideration in my coding. The social, political and geographical context in which journalists, media actors and news outlets work explicitly or implicitly influence their journalistic angles about specific topics. The selection of sources and quotes to include in the stories also plays a key role in the identification of the frames. Sources supported me in highlighting the tone of an article and understanding the context, as well as sometimes being clear markers that allowed me to identify the main frame of the story. For each article analysed, in order to identify the main frame, I therefore had to consider textual and lexical markers, journalistic tone, context and selection of sources, along with the characteristics and agenda of the news outlets that published it and the context in which the journalist that reported about the story had to work.

My final package of frames stemming from the pilot study was therefore:

- Conflict frame (generic)
- Political and power frame (generic)
- Humanitarian frame (generic)
- Rebuilding frame (inductive)
- International relation frame (inductive)
- Civilian frame (inductive)

The humanitarian frame directly originated from the generic human impact frame which is strongly linked to the civilian frame and the rebuilding frame. However, the civilian frame is characterised by a different focus, that of civilian daily life in conflict zones, while the rebuilding frame is more linked to the economic rebirth of the country, which also involves safety and stability for Syrian people and refugees. On the other hand, the political and power frame was identified by using the generic powerless frame as a starting point, however from this basis I also pinned down the international relations frame, focused on the reactions and relations of Syria with the international community, along with the rebuilding frame, which stands on the borderline between a more humanitarian approach and a more political view of the rebuilding process. Once I had established my frame package I could use it in the news framing analysis process, trying

to categorise the different frames that emerged from the articles and news stories taken into analysis. I therefore prepared a Frame matrix along with a coding sheet²¹.

2.8 Frame matrix

In summary, I settled on the following frame matrix for my substantive analysis of the four time periods:

Table 3. Frame matrix

FRAME	TYPE	DEFINITION	TOPIC
CONFLICT	Conflict, fighting involving different sides, focus on strategy, conquest, military moves	Fighting going on in Syria involving different sides who are involved into the war	Turkish invasion, military intervention by Western countries, Rebels fighting and counter-attacking, terrorism.
POWER AND POLITICAL	Political strategies and plans Policy related to the war Propaganda	Political responses regarding the country's problems. Strategies adopted by different parties.	Civil war Syrian instability Propaganda Analysis of political strategies
HUMANITARIAN	Helping civilians and refugees to get to safety or returning home. Provide assistance to the people trapped in war zones. Report civilians' situation and casualties	Humanitarian tragedy involving civilians, forced to flee their homes, trapped in warzones, killed during military actions	Conflict, bombardments.
REBUILDING	Rebuilding the country politically, economically through plans and strategies. Receiving support and help by foreign countries and organisations	Rebuilding national economy and structure. Receiving help and support from different countries and organisations. Rebuilding the nation's conscience. Safety for civilians.	Country divided by Civil war and foreign interventions and invasions. Lack of safety for civilians. Lack of resources to meet people's basic needs
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS	World powers' positions regarding the Syrian war. Relations among them. International conferences regarding policies and strategies regarding the ongoing conflict.	World powers policy of intervention. Relations among the countries involved in the war. Peace talks, ceasefires and conferences.	Political, economic and military interests in the war. Changes of the international relations among countries involved in the war

²¹ The coding sheet is included in the thesis as Appendix B, pp. 305-312

	Syria relations agreements with different countries. Relations among world powers, Syria and the UN.	Strategies to adopt about dealing with the Syrian issue. Syria's relations with world powers and countries.	
CIVILIAN	Reporting about civilians and refugees daily lives in warzones or camps.	Stories and news about civilians and people who try to survive the war or had to flee the country	Reporting about conflict from a different angle. Focus on the people caught up in the conflict Requesting for support and help to solve the situation.

I used my frame matrix and my coding sheet as the basis for the analysis of all the articles selected, pinning down the main frames emerging from each news story. The markers, listed in the coding sheet²² that I was able to identify in the different articles, were fundamental to pin down the frames, while the tone of the feature as well as the context and the selection of topics present in the news stories played an important role. I primarily tried to identify the main theme of the article from the title, trying to get an initial understanding of the topic approached, then I read through the article analysing the text and looking for markers that could actually help me to decide which frames were at work. I used lexical choices and phrases, along with analysis of the tone, context and selection of sources to identify the main frame (as shown in the frame matrix and in the coding sheet). However, sometimes I relied on visual elements that helped me in identifying the frame, such as photos or videos that were included in the news story.

The main purpose of the news framing analysis is to gain insight into the manifestation of multiple textual characteristics that fit together, in order to determine how framing devices and reasoning devices work together under the heading of an overarching idea (Van Gorp et al., 2009). As D'Angelo (2002) has argued, each frame provides a viewpoint that can help to understand issues. Therefore, the aim of a framing analysis should always be to identify a variety of different frames. News framing analysis allows the researcher to open his mind to new perspectives, so to understand not only the choice of covering a particular story through a specific lens, but also the social and cultural

²² The coding sheet is included in the thesis as Appendix B

implications and issues that influenced the media actors and news outlets to report about facts in that particular way. The news framing analysis was therefore fundamental to build a basis that could then inform the semi-structured interviews with journalists to be carried out later.

2.9 Sourcing analysis

Sourcing analysis played an important role in integrating both the news framing analysis and the semi-structured interviews. In fact, the sources used or cited in the different news stories analysed were important markers to help pin down specific frames or supported me in setting the tone of the articles and in identifying external influences that were present in the stories.

De Vreese (2005) argues that the frame building process takes place in a continuous interaction between journalists and elites. As stated by Stavitsky and Dvorkin (2007), ideally, journalists would call upon sources from the various sides in proportionate numbers and of similar standing. However, source multiplicity and diversity are not often exercised. Sometimes journalists tend to depend more on a group of sources who are already known to them. Gans (1979a) stated that while in theory sources could come from any class or group in society, studies show that in practice they usually come from the powerful classes or groups. While such powerful sources do not need to make extra efforts to appear in the media, 'the powerless must resort to civil disturbance to obtain it' (Gans, 1979a: pp. 65-77). On the other hand, Reese (1990) argues that the journalist-source relationship could be seen in a typology of four levels:

- high-power source/high-power media
- high-power source/low-power media
- low-power source/high-power media
- low-power source/low-power media.

Bennett (1990) also notes that media usually rely on élite sources as a media practice and proposes the concept of 'indexing' which states that voices included in news stories or expressed in editorials reflect the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate. In addition, other non-official sources are voices expressing opinions that are already embraced in the political circles. The remainder of other voices

are usually marginalised (Bennett, 1990). Journalists often quote these élite sources, like those with direct quotes, verbatim and incorporate them in the overall news story, rather than appearing tangentially in the report, making their interviews seem more important to the public and giving these sources more power to influence communities to their perspectives (Parmelee, 2014). However, due to the rise of social media and the internet, this situation has gradually changed as ordinary citizens, activists and other (often marginalised) groups connect with journalists and have their voices heard in the mainstream news media (Wallsten, 2011). Although journalists have accepted online news sourcing techniques into their daily news production process, they hesitate to use information retrieved from social media as direct and quoted sources in news reporting, mainly due to the problems related to the verification of these sources (Lecheler and Kruikemeiers, 2016). Lacy and Coulson (2000) noted that the government sources are usually the most cited, which means that élite sources are largely used by journalists, thanks to their credibility. Lazer et al. (2018) argue that several information sources lack professionalism and adherence to journalistic values, however these sources are distinct from other forms of user-generated content and citizen journalism. It was also important to take into account the situation in Syria, where journalists might be more inclined to consult sources in the context of breaking news or media restrictions where they cannot (immediately) access the area themselves and therefore try to learn from on-the-ground sources (Lotan, Graeff, Ananny, 2011).

Journalists seek out sources that are both available and suitable. This means, the authority of some sources is therefore bolstered while other voices are continually excluded (Franklin and Carlson, 2011). Laursen and Trapp (2021) found journalistic preferences for sources who are deemed inherently credible because of their positions of power, ubiquity, or research knowledge largely shape who is treated as an expert source; these élite organisations have advantages as sources over everyday citizens. Gans (2011: p. 6) suggests journalists, as representatives of the people in a democratic country, can and should make sure that 'all major demographic, geographic, and other sectors of the country appear in the news, especially those now not well represented'. He also suggests journalists are making improvements in the digital age to the creation of multi-perspectival news through better training and education, but long-standing traditions of journalism practice and norms continue to hold back the possibilities of better representation for all. In fact, as De Keyser, Raeymaeckers and

Paulussen (2011) found out, traditionally élite sources have enjoyed privileged access to journalists and they are still the most used. However, with the introduction of digital technologies on the internet, citizen sources and civilians occupy a central position and are valued more highly, as well as NGOs. In my research civilian sources played a central role as markers to identify different frames, but they also supported me in identifying the tone of the stories analysed. I also took into consideration the way these sources were used, as well as their contribution to the stories, thus these aspects supported me in the analysis of the external influences that were present in the stories. In addition, civilian sources offered a different perspective about themes and topics treated in the news stories selected, providing different angles about the conflict and the political situation in Syria. The sources' perspectives on the conflict are important to highlight which side they are explicitly or implicitly supporting as well as to identify the reason why they were selected in specific news stories.

The tone of the stories and the choice of specific sources are factors that need to be analysed in order to identify the main perspective of the sources cited in the news stories. The choice of the sources can also be influenced by editorial guidelines, policy, newsroom environment and criteria of the news organisation. Therefore, the choice of sources cited in different news stories and articles depends on different factors which may include the editorial line followed by the different news outlets. In addition, activism, propaganda, humanitarian, political and economic interests are elements that might influence the choice of sources. This helped me to investigate the key characteristics of reporting about the Syrian civil war, along with the challenges faced by Syrian media actors in relaying information about the war, in order to partially answer RQ1 and RQ 2.

This analysis enriched my study and enhanced the news framing analysis, providing markers useful to identify frames as well as important indicators to identify the tone and the context of the stories. Looking at the events reported in the different stories and confronting them with the selection of sources cited, are important markers that supported me in pinning down the main frames and the others that were present in the stories. Furthermore, sourcing analysis also helped me to add more specifics and broader content to both the frame matrix and the coding sheet.

As mentioned before, I tested sourcing analysis in the pilot study and it provided me with various points of reflection which helped me to build a robust and more structured methodology with which to approach my research. Sourcing analysis was also important for the following step of my research, based on semi-structured interview, as I was able to investigate the way the interviewees used their sources along with the criteria they followed to select them.

The full results of my sourcing analysis are set out in the next, first empirical chapter of this thesis.

2.10 Semi-structured interviews

From the outset of my project, my idea was to build my methodological approach on interviews with journalists, stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists who worked on the ground and reported from the warzones. I thought this approach would provide a rich pool of content and elements that would support me in my project, helping me really understand the issues they had to face in reporting about a complex conflict such as the Syrian war.

An interview is literally that, an interview, an interchange of views between two persons, conversing about a subject of mutual interest (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008), while Miller and Crabtree (1999) described interviewing as involving shared cultural knowledge. I decided to use semi-structured interviews for my research, which is a format that is sometimes equated with qualitative interviewing (Warren, 2002); in addition, they are probably also the most widespread style of interview used in the human and social sciences (Flick, 2002). According to Brinkmann (2013), semi-structured interviews can make better use of the knowledge-producing potential of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee and interviewer. Furthermore, they also give the interviewer a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge-producing participant in the process itself and he or she has a greater say in focusing the conversation on issues that are deemed important in relation to the research project. In semi-structured interviews, the questions are pre-planned prior to the interview, but the interviewer gives the interviewee the chance to elaborate and explain particular issues through the use of open-ended questions (Alsaawi, 2014). According to Bryman (2008), this approach is

appropriate to researchers who have an overview of their topic so that they can ask questions, but they prefer not to use a structured format which may hinder the depth and richness of the responses (Bryman, 2008). Dörnyei (2007) suggests that open-ended questions should be piloted in advance. In addition, semi-structured interviewing also mitigates the power relationship, encouraging the development of mutually and contextually grounded discourse. This offers an important ethical dimension.

On the side of interviewers, Atkinson and Silverman find that:

“In promoting a particular view of narratives of personal experience, researchers too often recapitulate, in an uncritical fashion, features of the contemporary interview society where the interview becomes a personal confessional” (1997: p. 305).

Qualitative interviewers are commonly looking for what are often multiple, perspectival, and contradictory meanings and angles, which demand careful interpretation. Therefore, there is much controversy concerning whether meanings are essentially there to be articulated by the interviewee and interpreted by the interviewer (Brinkmann, 2013). However, Denzin (2001: p. 24) argues that interviews are not a method of gathering information, but a vehicle for producing performance texts and performance ethnographies about self and society, while Nunkoosing (2005) claims that the popularity of interviewing in qualitative research does not necessarily indicate that it has to be applied, it is crucial to clarify the risks which might affect the interviewee before they sign the consent form. The interviewer has power regarding his/her research. Therefore, his/her interpretation of the interview should fulfil the validity requirements of the research community, which may affect the agreement with the interviewee of interpreting the interview. Likewise, the interviewee has power as a ‘privileged knower’ Nunkoosing (2005: p. 699). According to Brinkmann’s (2013) definition, my aim was not only to investigate the interviewees’ personal experience of reporting the conflict, but also to analyse their journalistic ways of reporting the Syrian war, highlighting their purposes and motivations, their ideas about conflict journalism, and the way the local media actors identified themselves as journalists, as well as whether their perception was shared by foreign journalists and news outlets working with them. The data gathered during my interviews helped me answer my research questions, especially RQ3. In this way, I was able to use the information gathered to

enrich my research and also to analyse the different techniques the interviewees used to move safely in the warzones, keep in touch with their sources and verify the news that they gathered.

I drew on Roulston's (2010) concept of the interview as a neo-positivist construct that emphasises how the conversation can be used to reveal 'the true self' of the interviewee. In this way, it is intended to elicit the essence of his/her experiences, resulting in solid, trustworthy data that are only accessible through interviews, with the interviewer having a non-interfering role. However, sometimes I realised that the postmodern and transformative concept of interviews emerged, so the conversation might be intended as an event that aims to transform ideas into being. The interview is depicted as a chance for people to create new possibilities for action and offers a rare opportunity for reflection on practice (Roulston, 2010). This is the case of my interviews with stringers or local reporters influenced by activism, especially against the Syrian government, that during the interviews shared their ideas about the revolution.

2.11 Interviewees

Once I had decided on using semi-structured interviews, I started to make a list of possible interviewees who could usefully contribute to my research.

I mainly focused on stringers, Syrian local reporters, Syrian journalists who had to leave the country, and also Western journalists or freelancers and news outlets' editors, in order to obtain different angles and perspectives about the topic. I tried to interview people who fell under the following categories:

- Syrian local reporters/editors
- Syrian diaspora journalist
- International journalists/editors who worked with Syrian media actors on the ground

My intention was to find a pool of ten interviewees (five from Syria and five from other countries), that directly worked on the ground or collaborated with local media actors, covering the conflict. The Syrian interviewees could provide me with insights about the characteristics of their work on the ground, along with their personal perception of their journalistic identity (RQ2 and RQ3). Foreign journalists interviewed could provide

information about their work with local media actors, their potentially different approach to covering a conflict in which they were not directly involved, as well as the way they perceived the identity of the media actors they were collaborating with (RQ2 and RQ3).

The usual approach to adopt in selecting participants for an interview is purposive sampling (Bryman, 2008). Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006: p. 59) state that ‘purposive samples are the most commonly used form of non-probabilistic sampling’. Seidman (2012) said that two criteria relating to the size of the sample should be kept in mind. The first one is sufficiency which can be felt by the interviewer. The other criterion is saturation, in which the interviewer begins to hear the same information he/she has already obtained from previous interviewees. These two criteria are more accurate than pre-determining a particular number of participants, especially in terms of interviews. So, I contacted the possible interviewees through social media, email and on the phone, granting anonymity, in case they requested it, as talking about their experience in the Syrian war could be risky, especially for those who were still in the country. This was a very difficult process, as many of them were still working on the ground and could not talk to me or did not respond to my emails or messages. I dedicated almost four months to identifying possible interviewees and contacting them, trying to arrange interviews. Eventually, I was able to interview ten people²³ – they all waived the right to anonymity, so are identified in this study by name.

I was able to interview the ten research participants via Skype or on the phone as I could not meet them in person. I was able to interview them from different angles and they each had different cultural and journalistic backgrounds. Five of the interviewees were from Syria and directly participated in the initial protests that led to the armed conflict, the other five interviewees, mostly editors and journalists, went to Syria to cover the conflict for different news outlets, and directly worked with stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters:

Syrian interviewees:

- Rami Jarrah
- Sarah Kassim

²³ A list of the interviewees is available in Appendix D, pp. 315-316

- Lina Chawaf
- Mahmoud Mosa
- Mansour Al-Omari

International editors and journalists interviewed:

- Francesca Borri (Italian)
- Tracey Shelton (Australian)
- Dahlia Kholaf (Egyptian)
- Cristiano Tinazzi (Italian)
- Ugo Lucio Borga (Italian)

In accordance with the semi-structured approach, I prepared a list of questions which I used for all of the interviews in order to approach the same themes gathering different perspectives and answers about each one. I also integrated this set with other questions that came up during the interviews. This strategy helped me in my thematic analysis, as I was able to prepare a list of the topics approached and analyse them starting from the information gathered during the interviews. Therefore, I was also able to engage with the different answers and approach of the interviewees allied to the themes we discussed during the semi-structured interviews.

I then approached each theme using the information gathered during the interviews which were also informed by the previous sourcing and news framing analysis.

In interviews, interviewers have the richest source of knowledge available. In most cases, I transcribed immediately after I conducted the interviews. If possible, it is therefore preferable for the interviewer to transcribe the conversations, and it is optimal to do so relatively soon after the conversation (Brinkmann, 2013). On the other hand, according to Shuy (2002), the telephone interview has swept the polling and survey industry in recent years and is now the dominant approach, in addition this approach is often considered more structured than face to face, and of course, Zoom/Skype offers the affordances of seeing the interviewee too. In addition, I followed the guidelines provided by Mayo (1933: p.65) about conducting an interview:

- Give your whole attention to the person interviewed, and make it evident that you are doing so.
- Listen— don't talk.
- Never argue; never give advice.
- Listen to: (a) what s/he wants to say (b) what s/he does not want to say (c) what s/he cannot say without help
- As you listen, plot out tentatively and for subsequent correction the pattern (personal) that is being set before you. To test this, from time to time summarise what has been said and present for comment. Always do this with the greatest caution, that is, clarify in ways that do not add or distort.
- Remember that everything said must be considered a personal confidence and not divulged to anyone.

In relation to qualitative interviewing, there is never one correct way to understand or practice a method or a technique, for everything depends on circumstances and on the researcher's intentions of conducting a particular research project (Brinkmann, 2013). Qualitative interviews are not conducted for their own sake, they are not a goal in themselves, but are staged and conducted in order to serve the researcher's goal of producing knowledge. Good interview reports often contain a reflexive account and discussion of both individual and social aspects of such motives. Clearly, the fact that interviews are conversations conducted for a purpose, which sets the agenda, raises a number of issues pertaining to power and control (Brinkmann, 2007).

In most interview studies, the goal is to obtain the interviewee's descriptions rather than reflections or theorisations. Interviewers are normally seeking descriptions of how interviewees experience the world, its episodes and events. Good interview questions thus invite interviewees to give descriptions and tend to avoid more abstract and reflective questions. In qualitative research in general, as in qualitative interviewing in particular, there is a primacy of the life world as experienced, since this is prior to the scientific theories we may formulate about it (Brinckmann, 2013). Kvale and Brinkmann (2008: pp. 242– 244) concluded that qualitative interviewing can in fact be an objective method. It is true that interviewing relies on subjectivity, but it is certainly possible to strive for objectivity about subjectivity, at least to some extent. As for the research, remaining open for multiple readings and interpretations is a sign of quality, whereas

attempts to close down alternative interpretations often betray the rich, varied, and open-ended nature of our conversational reality. In fact, as stated by Badiou (1998), researchers have to remain true to what the interviewees have told them.

Once I finished transcribing the interviews, I was able to gather a large range of data that helped me address my research questions, along with the results and the data gathered from the news framing and sourcing analyses, which were also fundamental to inform the interviews.

I decided to approach the data gathered during the interviews using thematic analysis as it is a method used for 'identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) and it can produce an insightful analysis that answers particular research questions' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: p. 79). In addition, this approach usually complements the research questions by facilitating an investigation of the interview data from a data-driven perspective based on coding in an inductive way and from the research question perspective to check if the data were consistent with the research questions and providing sufficient information (Narantuya, 2016). What counts as a theme is that it is something which captures the key idea about the data in relation to the research question and which represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As Bazeley (2009) claims themes only attain full significance when they are linked to form a coordinated picture or an explanatory model. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that themes or patterns within data can be identified either in an inductive 'bottom up' way, or in a theoretical, deductive 'top down' way. The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data (Thomas, 2003). Thomas (2003) points out three main purposes for using an inductive approach:

1. To condense extensive and varied raw text data into a brief, summary format;
2. To establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data;
3. To develop a model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes which are evident in the raw data.

Thematic analysis is useful for understanding the subject meanings that people give to their experience (Banyard and Miller, 1998). In my research, thematic analysis also helped me in order to categorise the data gathered in the interviews and to compare them to each other. As I was able to interview people from diverse backgrounds, working for different news agencies, who have different journalistic experience and had various motivations to report about the war, I could actually compare all the information gathered to inform my study in greater depth, to provide different perspectives and a diversified set of ideas and angles.

Bourdieu's field theory also helped me analyse the data gathered in the interviews. In fact, it offers a coherent and powerful analytical model for media research, providing a means to incorporate history in media analysis and a tool for relational and spatial social analysis (Benson and Neveu, 2005).

As stated in the literature review,²⁴ given the heteronomous and dynamic subject of the journalistic field²⁵, I sought to use the concepts of 'habitus' and 'capital' to explore how the Syrian media actors (interlopers)²⁶ move around the field trying to penetrate its boundaries and, sometimes, might gain access. The data gathered through the interviews enabled me to investigate not only the cultural, socio-economic and professional backgrounds of the interviewees, but also how they developed skills through training in order to produce content which could help them enter the field as new agents. In addition, I was able to explore the issues regarding Syrian media actors' journalistic identity as well as how their identity and role was perceived by those who were already part of the journalistic field.

By gathering data about the personal experiences, the background and the professional path of the interviewees I was able to analyse their structural position as well as the historical trajectory that they followed to arrive at that position (habitus) through a series of steps. In particular, I focused on how Syrian media actors were able to penetrate the boundaries of the journalistic field, as well as how professional journalists, already positioned inside the field, collaborated with them and perceived them. Syrian media actors constantly moved inside and outside the field trying to gain their own

²⁴ Ref. Literature review, pp. 25-31

²⁵ Ref. Literature review (Bourdieu and Munnik), pp. 25-31

²⁶ Ref. Literature review (Eldridge), pp.25-31

space and recognition, constantly adapting to the journalistic standards followed by foreign media outlets. Furthermore, I also focused on the concept of capital, analysing Syrian media actors' position between those agents that possess both large and restricted cultural production. In fact media actors worked for local news agencies and sometimes founded their own media outlets, but, at the same time, were in touch with large media outlets, collaborating with them. It was also possible to analyse their position regarding the economic capital, as their main assets were direct information from inaccessible areas, that could be of great value for media news agencies and professional journalists. These aspects also influenced their path towards being accepted as part of the journalistic field.

2.12 Ethics

The research project was submitted to and approved by the Bournemouth University Ethics Committee.

As my research project is based on analysing the role played by stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters in the Syrian conflict, I looked for people who have worked as stringers and reporters during the Syrian civil war, producing journalistic material from the war zones and collaborating with Western or Syrian news agencies. In addition, I was also able to interview stringers and journalists who fled Syria and founded their own news agency or kept collaborating with other news outlets. It was important to realise from an ethical perspective that the people who agreed to be interviewed could be vulnerable due to the stress and challenges of living in a war zone and/or reporting about victims and survivors of war. Some of the interviewees might be traumatised and my interviews could run the risk of re-traumatisation. In addition, they could also choose anonymity for protection as interviewing people who were or are still involved in reporting the Syrian civil war, might have security consequences in their personal life, mainly if they are still based in the country. In fact, the Syrian government as well as other local political organs and organisations might take action against the interviewees. The participants were therefore offered anonymity if requested and were allowed to withdraw at any time during the process without giving reason. In fact, all of the participants chose to be cited and attributed in my thesis. However, I carefully used the information gathered, relying on the experience of my supervisors for advice on how to best manage this situation. Furthermore, as the topic is related to war, it could be

stressful for some of the participants to talk about it, especially if they were directly involved. Therefore, I was coached in trauma-literate interviewing and abided by best practice set out by the Dart Centre for Journalism & Trauma²⁷. I discussed these issues with my supervisors who have a wealth of knowledge and expertise in this area. I devised a 'Participant Information Sheet' and a 'Participant Agreement Form' that all the research participants had to sign in order to consent to take part in the project. Participants were able to request to withdraw from the process at any stage.

2.13 Research limitations

My research project has potential limitations as the data gathered from news framing analysis and sourcing analysis are based on a limited number of news stories published in a specific range of times and whilst the pool of interviewees is diverse, it is still limited to ten people.

The Syrian conflict started in 2011 and it was still raging in the country until 2024, when Assad had to flee and the Coalition suddenly took control of Damascus. I had to choose to analyse news stories published in limited time ranges, as I could not focus on analysing thirteen years of conflict, due to time and word count limitations. However, I tried to choose periods of time where the news stories published could offer a large range of themes and angles which could provide a useful insight to the way the conflict was covered and approached. In addition, I had to focus on just five news outlets, as it was not possible to analyse all the news packages produced and published by the different news outlets reporting on the conflict. I tried to choose news outlets that had different interests in covering the war and, at the same time, provided different angles and perspectives about the conflict, in order to obtain a more complete picture within the limited timeframes. For my interviews, I started from a long list of possible interviewees, however only ten people agreed to speak with me about this topic. In fact, the only means I had to contact them was through social media and in many cases, I did not receive any response. Furthermore, I wasn't able to interview journalists or editors working for SANA, mainly due to the restrictions and limitations imposed by the Syrian government, so I could not collect any data about their perspective, methodology of work, or standards in covering the war. I chose a mixed methodology approach to my

²⁷ See www.dart.org

research to integrate the results of sourcing and news framing analysis with the data provided by the interviews, however, due the limited pool of interviewees and the qualitative method chosen, the results might be subject to biases and cannot be generalised.

2.14 Conclusion

A mixed methodological approach incorporating news framing and sourcing analysis together with semi-structured interviews provided me with the wealth of data I needed for my project. The pilot study played a fundamental part in the overall conceptualisation of my methodology, as it afforded me the opportunity to test my method, gather the initial results and consequently to adapt my methodological approach when needed and look for different solutions, leading me to the definitive approach I decided to adopt.

The following empirical chapters focus on answering my research questions, investigating the key characteristics of reporting about Syrian civil war (RQ1), the identity of the media actors relaying information about the conflict and the challenges they faced (RQ2), along with the way the media actors perceive their identity and how Western news outlets perceive them (RQ3).

Chapter 3 - Sourcing analysis

3.1 Introduction

As already stated, my initial intention, approaching my research project, was to base my methodology on news framing analysis and interviews in order to extract a large pool of data that would support my research process.

My pilot study had focused on testing a news framing analysis. But I quickly found that the choice of sources in each story and, in particular, the selection of the interviewees, were markers which were just as important as visual material or lexical choices in helping me identify the main frame of a story. As a result, I started to look at the selection of sources used from a different perspective. Previously, I had focused solely on the topic of the articles together with lexical and visual markers.

So, I decided to incorporate a sourcing analysis into my methodology. The diversity of the sources used by different news outlets to report the same story, as well as the selection of the sources by different news organisations helped me to conduct my analysis in greater depth. It also supported me in taking into consideration the external influences that might be present in each story or that might directly act on specific news agencies. It was important not only to analyse the interviewees' point of view, but also the choices of the five news outlets and how they relied on particular sources when reporting specific stories.

Sourcing analysis helped me answer my RQ1. It enabled me to analyse the different influences that were key to identifying the frames emerging from each story. The analysis of the selection of sources used by different news outlets allowed me to identify elements linked to propaganda and activism, along with other factors that were unique for each news outlet analysed. Sourcing analysis was therefore key in pinning down the main characteristics of reporting about the conflict and in understanding how the Syrian war was framed across different news outlets.

3.2 Types of sources

In conducting my sourcing analysis, I was able to identify a large number of sources that were present in the articles. I decided to categorise them not only to facilitate the

analysis process, but also to understand which sources the five news outlets usually relied on. This allowed me to analyse the characteristics and the nature of the work of both media outlets and media actors.

I decided to group them under different categories as shown in the following table:

Table 4. Sources' categories and definitions²⁸

SOURCE CATEGORY	SOURCE'S DEFINITION
Syrian government Sub-categories: • Al Assad • Prime minister • Foreign ministry • Government cabinet • provincial governors • Syrian police	This category includes Syrian government spokesmen, officials and members of the government, including ministers and leaders
Syrian National Coalition Sub-categories: • SOHR • SIG	This category includes NCS officials, representatives and supporters, including people who are part of the Coalition Council and people who are conducting a different type of war by sharing information about the war through different channels (social media, blogs, websites, independent news agencies).
Civilians Sub-categories: • Civilians trapped in cities under siege • Refugees	This category includes Syrian people who are directly experiencing the horrors of the war, trying to survive and rebuild their lives and country. It also includes refugees and people who fled the country to escape the war.
UN Sub-categories: • UNDP • OCHA • UNHCR • WHO • UNFPA	This category includes UN officials directly involved in the process of ending the Syrian war and providing support and help to the country and its population.

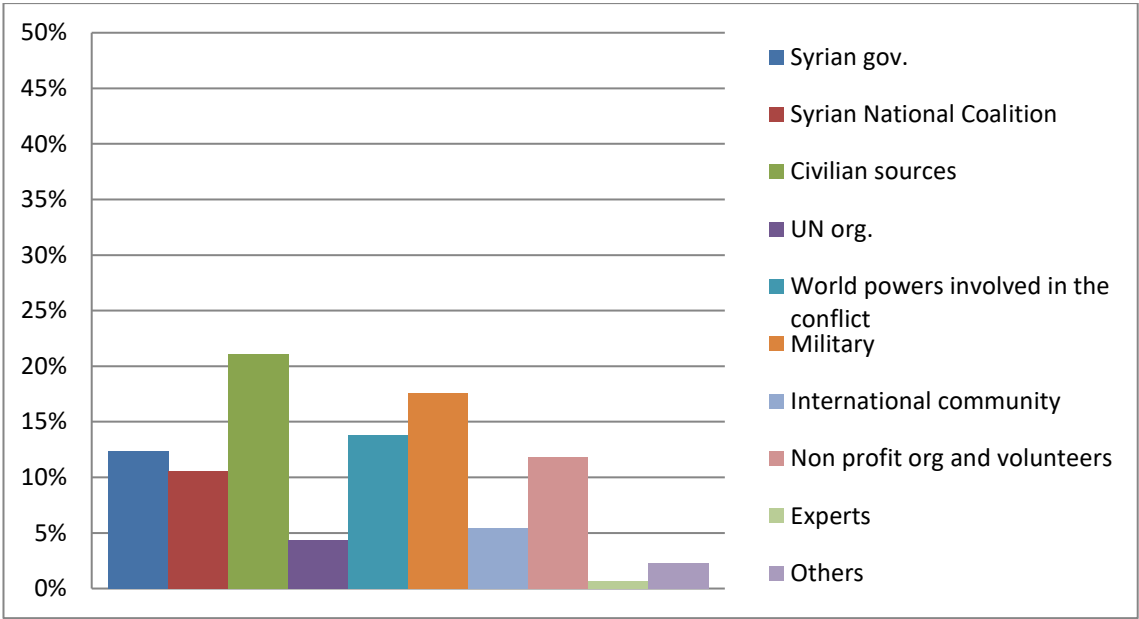
²⁸ See Appendix E, for tables of the numerical data, pp.317-329

Volunteers, non-profit organization members Sub-categories: • SARC • White Helmets • Red Crescent • NGOs	This category includes people who are working to support the Syrian population, refugees, civilians and war victims, providing direct support in the field, but also sharing data and stories about the humanitarian tragedy which afflicted the Syrian population.
World powers involved in the war Sub-categories: • Russia • USA • China • Turkey • Iran	This category includes officials and representatives of those countries who are both directly and indirectly involved in the conflict for different reasons, supporting different sides (military, strategic, economical etc.)
Experts Sub-categories: • Syrian war experts • Academics • Researchers	This category includes those people who studied the course of the conflict and provide insights about their studies, ideas and predictions about the future of the conflict and the country.
Military Sub-categories: • Syrian armed forces • Free Syrian Army (FSA) • Kurdish forces • SDF • Terrorist groups	This category includes soldiers, volunteers and fighters from different sides who were directly involved in combat during the war
International community Sub-categories: • International delegations • Foreign ministries (mainly UK, France, USA and Russia) • Foreign Ambassadors	This category includes officials, representatives and politicians of countries who are interested in the course of the Syrian war. Their aim is mainly to stop the war, supporting refugees and help the rebuilding of the country
Other sources Sub-categories: • SNHR	Other sources which are not part of the previous categories identified

Once the different sources were identified and categorised in the sourcing analysis table above, I was able to look at them as one important marker of a frame, always taking into consideration the main topic of the individual story, the context and the news outlet which published it.

3.3 Results of the sourcing analysis

Table 5. Main sources used by all news outlets aggregated and for all time periods²⁹



3.3a Civilian sources

As shown in the table above, civilians were the most used source in the overall sample of stories written by the five news outlets; I identified that this type of source was mainly a marker to help pin down the civilian frame. But crucially, while all the news outlets used civilian voices, they did so in different ways.

Global Voices mainly used civilians as sources, including doctors, journalists, graphic novelists and others. Their contribution was key in pinning down the civilian frame as shown in the statements of a doctor in East Goutha, telling about the challenges he had to face working in a cancer treatment centre, in a city under siege:

“We make medical analyses and give medication to patients free of charge. [...] At the beginning of 2017, the siege tightened, so the huge number of patients

²⁹ See Appendix E

leads to a drain in treatment and a shortage of many medications. Now what we have in our hands serves only 3% of patients” (Global Voices, n.4).

In some stories published by SANA and NCS, despite use of the same type of sources it was more difficult to identify the civilian frame, as the main topic was often about demonstrations and protests organised by the Syrian people against war, occupation, or foreign intervention in Syrian political issues. Civilians interviewed by SANA about the official recognition by the USA of the Israeli occupation of Golan Heights stated that they will not deal with or acknowledge it, stressing their adherence to their homeland and Arabism (SANA, n.36). The National Coalition of Syrians (NCS) interviewed civilians protesting against the Syrian government’s war crimes, asserting that the Assad regime is responsible for widespread crimes in Syria (NCS, n.325). In both cases, the civilian frame was present more in the background, while the dominant frame emerging was the political and power frame. The contribution of civilian sources was strongly linked to policy and they might have been influenced by activism and propaganda.

SANA also published some stories where the civilian frame emerged and war or policy were not the main topic. One such article treated an important archaeological discovery (SANA, n.341) and the interviewee was the archaeologist who led the excavations. However, in SANA and NCS stories, the civilian sources almost never talked about their personal situation and never provided their point of view about the war and telling their stories. This might be due to the influence exerted by the Syrian government and the Coalition on their official news agencies. The civilian personal perspective was therefore limited by the news outlets, reducing civilian sources to tools for propaganda or activism. NCS mainly used them to enhance the principles and goals of the Syrian Revolution, or to condemn the actions of the Syrian government and the army. Nevertheless, SANA used civilian sources as the main witnesses of rebuilding plans approved by the government, describing its efforts to provide basic services to the population, to rebuild cities, to support refugees’ return or to simply talk about their daily life or their jobs, in order to picture Syria as a safer country and almost at peace. Civilian sources cited by SANA, also denounced the crimes of the so-called terrorists Free Syrian Army and the crimes of the Syrian Coalition.

In other ways, SNHR also used civilians as an important source of information. In many SNHR stories, the presence of civilian sources was a key marker to identify the civilian

frame. Civilians witnessed people being arrested without knowing the cause (SNHR, n.317), or even killed by unknown gunmen, such as the lawyer Jamil Abdi (SNHR, 325). In these stories, the civilian frame emerged as the main one, however it was strongly linked to humanitarian and political themes, which might indicate the presence of the humanitarian or the political and power frame residing in the background. Civilian sources were therefore an important marker to identify the civilian frame in SNHR, as their intervention was limited to describing what they saw. SNHR, in fact, was mainly focused on reporting facts and providing data to report about the humanitarian issues, therefore refusing any political influence.

In Reuters stories, similarly to other news outlets, the presence of civilian sources was a marker to identify the civilian frame. However, the main frame was often linked to the humanitarian theme. Civilians talked about their daily life in cities where the conflict was raging:

“I had two brothers and a sister. They all died, and then I was by myself. My little sister, I loved her a lot. I used to take her with me to the market” (Reuters, n.115, Syrian civilian).

Reuters cited these sources in stories where the main goal is to describe the humanitarian tragedy, giving civilians a voice, trying to avoid political influences. Reuters mainly focused on civilians who were trapped in cities controlled by IS. In this case, the civilian frame emerged as the main one, but it intertwined with the humanitarian frame, sometimes highlighting a slightly condemnatory tone:

“‘Our only goal is to bring our children back home and finish this agony as soon as possible, I feel terrible, miserable, because the children are not guilty, they did not have a choice,’ said a Bosnian woman about her children who were forced to join the IS” (Reuters, n.136).

In going through my analysis, civilians, NGOs, and the UN were used more frequently as sources in stories where the main frames were civilian and humanitarian. On the other hand, I realised that the military, Syrian government, SNC, international Community, world power representatives and officials were usually cited in stories where the conflict, international relations and political and power frames emerged.

3.3b Points of view

The sourcing analysis also allowed me to identify the main point of view of each source, so I was able to categorise them in four macro-categories, as also shown in my pilot study, but more in depth:

- Pro-Syrian government: usually strongly influenced by Syrian government propaganda and Syrian political and economic interests;
- Pro-Syrian Coalition: usually focused on fighting for freedom, enhancing the revolution and its political goals, along with condemning the absolutist policy of the Syrian government;
- Humanitarian: focused on talking about the Syrian population, refugees and civilians living in the war zone;
- Neutral: usually looking at the war from a more neutral perspective.

3.4 Sourcing analysis and frames

3.4a How sources are used in each of the main frames

As stated above, civilian sources were the most cited in the articles analysed and their contribution was used differently depending on the news outlets. What follows is an analysis of how sources were used in each of the frames in my research and their contribution to the identification of different frames.

I was not able to identify a specific source that I could use as a marker to pin down the *rebuilding frame*, as there was not a specific source that was usually present in the stories where the rebuilding frame emerged. The civilians were almost never used as sources. Instead, the sourcing analysis was used as a tool to support me in examining the contributions of various interviewees and the statements released by officials and spokesmen, in order to figure out the context and the tone of the story. These two factors were therefore fundamental in identifying the frame and, at the same time, gaining an insight to the editorial guidelines and the agenda of the news agencies which published the story.

SANA mostly relied on various official sources in the stories where I was able to identify the rebuilding frame, citing military, government officials and civilian representatives. SANA's selection of sources did not really support my analysis in identifying the main

frame, as the statements were gathered from people directly involved in the rebuilding process of the country:

- Head of the Immigration and Passports Centre at the crossing, Col. Mazen Ghandour (SANA, n.249)
- Logistic and Transport Authorities (SANA, n.262)
- Civilian representative (SANA, n.183)

NCS adopted almost the same strategy, mainly using government officials as sources in the stories where the rebuilding frame emerged:

“The meeting resulted in the approval of funding and budgets for projects in the liberated areas, pointing out that the implementation of these projects will reflect positively on the reality of services being provided to the population in those areas” (Al-Bahra, Syrian Coalition representative, NCS, n.149).

However, Reuters also selected officials as main sources for stories where I identified rebuilding as the main frame. Filippo Grandi (UNHCR) and Britain’s foreign office minister for the Middle East, Alistair Burt (Reuters, n.146) were the main sources used in the feature ‘U.N. agency calls for more access in Syria to help refugees return’.

The lack of civilian sources in these types of stories might be due to factors that differed for each news outlet studied. SANA usually relied on different Syrian government official sources, however only providing the Syrian government’s point of view. This aspect highlighted the fact that SANA is the official news agency of the Syrian government, therefore its guidelines and standards were approved by the government, making it the main channel for government propaganda. NCS also usually selected Syrian Coalition officials as sources and this choice might be due to the Coalition’s need to gain credibility in the eyes of the international community and share its revolutionary ideas, showing the influence exerted by the Coalition on its main news outlet. On the other hand, Reuters also chose officials as main sources in its stories, looking for different perspectives and different contributions, but without interviewing civilians or officials from the Syrian government or the Syrian Coalition. This might be due to the lack of access to Syria and to the dangerous situation that foreign journalists had to face in reporting the conflict. This situation might have forced journalists to usually rely on elite sources. In the stories where the rebuilding frame emerged, I also had to take into

account the tone and the context of each feature. In SANA and NCS stories the political and power frame could always be detected in the background without being the main one, therefore, the sources selected in these stories are usually officials or politicians. Reuters, on the other hand, published stories where the rebuilding frame emerged, however it is usually linked to the humanitarian theme as also shown by the choice of the sources.

The sources used in stories which had a dominant *conflict frame* were representatives and officials of the various armies involved (SDF, FSA, Syrian Army) as well as reporters embedded with an army. The sources used were clear markers that I used to identify this frame. As all the news outlets relied on these sources, the conflict frame was relatively easy to pin down, however, their approach to the conflict and also their use of the sources mentioned above usually differed.

SANA relied almost exclusively on military sources and official members of the Syrian Army, directly involved in the conflict's main events. Sources were usually cited to describe the course of the war and the progress of the Syrian Army against the enemies, who are commonly identified as terrorists:

“A Military source told that units of the army established control over the villages and towns of al-Khaween al-Qabir, Zarzour, rasm Sham al-Hawa, al-Masharaf in Hama north-eastern countryside after eliminating a large number of terrorists there” (SANA, n.4)

The word ‘terrorists’ is used to identify different groups fighting against the Syrian Army (Free Syrian Army, Al Nusra, IS...), without precisely identifying them. SANA's sources used the term ‘terrorists’ in article n.334 to describe the attack on Banjaro Village and it also used the same word in article n.339 to report about the ‘deployment of drones from their positions in Idlib to send them in the direction of Khmeimim Airport, effectively contrasted by anti-air defences.’ It was therefore difficult to understand which group or army the sources were talking about in the stories analysed. The sources were usually more precise when talking about the Israel or al-Nusra, however the word ‘terrorist’ is always present:

“The Command indicated that this outrageous aggression reaffirms Israel's support to the terrorist groups and its desperate attempts to raise their collapsed

morale due to the heavy losses inflicted upon them in Harasta area in the Eastern Ghouta, and due to the sweeping victories which are being achieved by the Syrian Arab Army in Idlib” (SANA, n.38).

“An army unit carried out artillery strikes on the positions and fortified positions of Jabhat al-Nusra terrorists and other armed groups affiliated to it in the outskirts of the town of Qalaat al-Madiq in northern Hama” (SANA, n.180, SANA reporter embedded with the army).

In SANA stories the word ‘terrorists’ used by the sources was therefore a clear marker to identify the conflict frame. In addition, the articles where this frame was present usually approached the theme of the conflict from a unilateral point of view, describing Syrian Army’s strategies, progresses and victories, or exposing the actions of those identified as terrorists, highlighting the great influence exerted by the Syrian government on the news agency.

Reuters, on the other hand, mainly relied on élite sources (officials and spokesmen) but also on local reporters based on the ground. The lack of Reuters reporters embedded with the armies or present at the frontline, might have been a factor in the choice of the news agency to rely on verified sources to use in its pieces:

“The Syrian army and its allies have gained control over the town of Sinjar 14 kms from Abu al-Duhur, and three villages to the west. [...] Battles have shifted now to the northwest of Sinjar after the Syrian army and its allies have controlled the town - the Britain-based monitor reported³⁰” (Reuters, n.6).

Reuters tried to cover the war from different sides, describing the movements and the strategies of the various armies and groups involved, selecting a large number of available sources, trying to gain the different perspective of the war from different sides, even the civilian side. Reuters also relied on the data provided by the humanitarian groups and the UN, present on the ground:

“Tens of thousands of rebels and civilians took refuge in Idlib after abandoning their homes in other parts of western Syria that the government and its foreign allies have retaken. The fighting and air strikes have forced more than 60,000

³⁰ The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

people to leave their homes since Nov. 1, according to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)” (Reuters, n.6).

Reuters selected sources from different sides to better describe the conflict, using officials and spokesmen not only from the FSA or the Syrian Army, but also from the other powers involved in the war, such as the Turkish Defence Minister, or the SDF (Reuters, n.44). In addition, the news agency relied on the reports provided by other media, such as newspapers (Reuters, n.164), trying to get a complete picture of the situation. This might be due to the lack of Reuters reporters on the ground and the difficulties faced in finding verified sources to be trusted; furthermore, the attempt to portray conflict from all sides, piecing together a mosaic from as many sources as possible and, often, leaving the reader to draw his/her own conclusions is the very ethos of Reuters reporting. In fact, in the section Standards and Values of Reuters website, it highlights that it is important to ‘talk to sources on all sides of a deal, dispute, negotiation or conflict.’³¹

SNHR and NCS usually selected the same sources mentioned above, however, their approach differed, as the humanitarian frame was also usually present in the stories where the conflict frame emerged. SNHR mainly selected sources among its own operators on the ground. The conflict itself was not its main focus, so the stories where this frame emerged are limited:

“The bombing is the first by Russian forces since the truce declared by the forces in the fourth de-escalation zone on August 31, 2019.” (SNHR, n.225, SNHR reporter).

“Syrian regime fixed-wing warplanes fired a missile near Civil Defence Centre in Sfuhun village in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate” (SNHR, n.231, SNHR reporter).

I was not able to categorise the sources as clear markers for the conflict frame in SNHR stories, as the news outlet seemed not to be interested in the development of the

³¹ Reuters: <https://www.reutersagency.com/en/about/standards-values/>

conflict. It focused more on the perpetrators of the attacks, reporting the facts and limiting the personal perspective of the sources.

Nevertheless, NCS also mainly used official sources linked to the military in the stories published, where the conflict frame emerged, but the humanitarian frame was also present. The themes that were approached in these stories mainly described the warzone and the attacks launched by the Syrian Army and the terrorist cells against Syrian Coalition strongholds. However, the news outlet also highlighted the situation of civilians:

“The Assad regime and its Russian ally have a clear policy, which is to depopulate the region in order to control it. [...] If the regime continues to advance at this pace, we will not be talking about a possible scenario, but a major catastrophe amid dwindling international support and the lack of an international response.” (NCS, n.227, Raed Al-Sale, Director of the Syrian Civil Defence Corps).

The sources usually speak of the inability of the international community along with the humanitarian tragedy in the warzones. In fact, they accused the Syrian Army and its allies of spreading terrorism, using the same word as the sources cited by SANA, to indicate the enemy:

“Terrorism that the regime is managing and spreading, as well the terrorism being practiced by the allied militias and organisations of various denominations are the direct result of the international failure to deal with the issue and its inability to impose a real political solution.” (NCS, n.132, The Syrian Coalition Media Dept.).

This choice might be due to the political strategy adopted by the Syrian Coalition in order to push the international community for intervention, even if the conflict frame was the main one emerging in the stories published, the sources selected usually talk about humanitarian issues picturing a situation of crisis, providing a different angle to look at the conflict, probably influenced by activism.

Global Voices published just one article where the conflict frame emerged, the sources were selected among the military and Russian reporters embedded with the army, but

the main focus was on the prohibition for Russian soldiers deployed in Syria to post on social media. The conflict was therefore described from a different perspective, describing another face of the conflict, such as the information war:

“Soldier Yegor Kruglov spent 15 days behind bars for sending photos of himself to his girlfriend using social media months” (Global Voices, n.15, Russian Reporter).

“Military servicemen are of special interest to the security services of several states, to terrorist and extremist organisations.” (Global Voices, n.15, Russian Conflict Intelligence Team).

In Global Voices stories, the sources were not clear markers to identify the conflict frame.

The sources used in stories which had a dominant *political and power* frame were mainly officials and spokesmen from different parties, but also civilians or experts analysing the situation. I was not able to identify specific sources as markers in the stories where the political and power frame emerged, but the selection of sources helped me to identify the tone of the stories, as well as to highlight the approach chosen by the news outlets in reporting about the situation in Syria, pinning down the various influences present in the articles.

SANA and NCS mainly relied on official sources, Syrian government for SANA and Syrian Coalition for NCS. As official news outlets for the main two parties involved in the war, their selection of the sources, as well as the topics treated in the stories, were respectively influenced by activism or propaganda. The sources selected mainly focused on the Syrian political situation, sometimes mentioning foreign countries’ policy, strategies or political achievements, related to the Syrian situation.

“Changing the murderous Iranian regime, the first supporter of sectarian militias in the region, will help restore security, stability and peace in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon” (NCS, n.6, Riad Seif, president of Syrian Coalition).

“The US President’s declaration to recognise the annexation of the occupied Syrian Golan to the Israeli occupation entity is a flagrant aggression on the

sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic” (SANA, n. 212, Syrian Foreign and Expatriates Ministry).

NCS and SANA also used civilian sources, especially in articles which reported on demonstrations against the Syrian government or the Coalition along with political interventions by foreign countries in Syria. The main focus of SANA and NCS was to highlight the civilians’ will to condemn political actions or strategies which were also previously condemned by the Syrian government or the Coalition. In this case the sources’ declarations were almost used as activism or propaganda tools to confirm that the population supported the government or the Coalition, providing the idea of a united front in both cases:

“The Popular and official activities of Quneitra organised protests in their gatherings in the towns and neighbourhoods of Jdeidet al-Fadel, al-Dahadeel, Naher Aisha, Qudsiya, Mafraq Hejeira in Damascus and its countryside to condemn Trump’s declaration, considering it void and meaningless. They asserted that the occupied Syrian Golan is a Syrian Arab territory and it will return to the motherland sooner or later.” (SANA, n.221, SANA’s reporter).

“The demonstrators stressed that they are the real owners of the land as they reasserted the right of the residents of the town to return to their homes. They condemned the Assad regime’s destruction of the infrastructure and the looting of civilian homes after the displacement of its owners.” (NCS, n.135, Syrian National Coalition’s Media Dept.).

Reuters, as well, mostly used officials and spokesmen as main sources in the stories where I was able to identify the political and power frame. Sources focused more on international policy than on local Syrian policy. Reuters interest was therefore attracted by political strategies adopted by the world powers involved in the Syrian conflict, analysing their approach from different angles and their reaction to the political actions undertaken by other parties involved.

“If it turns out that this operation takes a turn other than to fight a potential terrorist threat to the Turkish border and becomes an invasion operation, (then) this becomes a real problem for us (Reuters, n. 108, French Pres. Macron). [...] If

France is interpreting this issue as such (invasion operation), we need to assess what they have done in Syria accordingly (Reuters, n. 108, Turkish Prime Minister Yildirim).”

Reuters relied on the declaration of élite sources to provide a bigger and multilateral political picture of the different approaches to the Syrian conflict, adopted by the countries involved, analysing various perspectives. The UN was also an important source, as it was considered the main mediator among the different sides involved:

“The European members of the UN council said on Tuesday they did not recognise Israel’s sovereignty over the territories it has occupied since June 1967, including the Golan Heights, and raised concerns about broader consequences of recognizing illegal annexation and also about the broader regional consequences.” (Reuters, n.199, UN Security Council report).

SNHR did not employ the political theme in its stories, therefore this frame did not emerge in SNHR’s articles, while Global Voices, as before, approached the political topic from a different point of view. The sources were therefore officials and spokesmen who intervened not to speak about the political situation in Syria, but about the way in which specific policies could improve the situation or regulate issues also not directly related to the conflict, such as the article ‘EU proposal pushes tech companies to tackle terrorist content with AI, despite implications for war crimes evidence’ (Global Voices n.14). In this case, the sources cited supported me in identifying the political and power frame, as their contribution was about political interventions by the EU which could help regulate the spreading of terrorist content, however, the topic was not related directly to the Syrian situation.

The sources used in stories which had a dominant *international relations* frame were always officials and spokesmen who were part of a delegation. In pinning down the frame, the sourcing analysis was key, as this frame might be confused with the political and power frame. This was therefore a clear marker which greatly supported me in identifying the main frame. The topics of the stories where the frame was present were always linked to the political strategies adopted by different sides of the war, foreign countries interventions and actions as well as agreements stipulated.

SANA and NCS, as main media outlets for respectively the Syrian government and the Syrian Coalition, selected their sources among their own delegation members, so, as mentioned before, the stories published were greatly influenced by propaganda or activism. SANA mainly insisted on Syria's goal to build relations with other countries to fight terrorism (intended as the Coalition) and promote a different image of Syria around the world.

"My country and Syria are bound by deeply-rooted relations and that was highlighted through Brazil's standing by Syria in face of terrorism." (SANA, n.20, Achilles Zaluar, Brazilian ambassador in Damascus)

"He called the visiting delegation to brief the Brazilian public opinion on the true image of what is going on in Syria of the crimes perpetrated by the terrorist organisations and groups backed by regional and international forces over the past seven years. (SANA, n.29, Syrian Deputy Prime Minister, Foreign and Expatriates Minister, Walid al-Moallem).

SANA also reported the statements released by unofficial delegations, such as the French Youth delegation, which came to Syria to 'salute its resilience and convey the truth to the French people' (SANA, n.8 Delegation's chairman Iskandar Oumid). The sources' selection was helpful not only to identify the frame but also to highlight the propaganda aspects emerging from the stories, probably due to the influence exerted by the government on the media outlet.

On the other hand, NCS as previously stated, mainly cited sources that focused on enhancing its relations with the international community and the UN, in order to gain support for the revolution, as stated by Hariri (head of Negotiations Committee), who emphasised:

"The important role that Egypt could play as a major Arab country in enforcing UN resolutions on Syria and in stressing the need to abide by these resolutions as well as in not allowing the derailment of the Geneva process from achieving its objectives in finding a just solution to the Syrian crisis" (NCS, n.8).

The sources cited in NCS's stories especially focused on the role of the world powers that could intervene and bring peace to Syria. However, the selection of sources might

have been influenced by activism, as the Coalition's main goal was to gain allies and push for their intervention in order to secure the territorial and political conquests obtained during the Revolution.

"The Coalition looks forward to increased political and diplomatic action by the United States to restore balance to the political process aimed at building a secure, stable state that is free of the Assad regime and the Iranian militias." (NCS, n.49, Pres. Mustafa).

NCS mainly used official sources, like SANA. Although, this selection of sources only provided the Coalition's point of view, without taking into consideration the bigger picture.

Reuters, on the other hand, tried to include many sources from different sides of the conflict, focusing more on the international impact of the war and on the relations among the world powers involved in the conflict. In the article 'Syrian opposition calls on Trump and EU to put pressure on Russia and Iran' (Reuters, n. 35), when approaching the topic of the formation of the SDF, different sources were cited, providing different point of view:

"Assad has responded to the plan by vowing to drive U.S. troops from Syria. Turkey has called the force a terrorist army and vowed to crush it. Iran said on Tuesday creation of the SDF force would fan the flames of war, echoing the vehement response of Syria, Turkey and Russia" (Reuters, n.35).

The sources cited were officials and spokesmen, but different perspectives led to more complete analysis of the war. The frame also emerged in stories not directly linked to the conflict, Reuters, in fact, also focused on international relations among the world powers, not directly involving Syria or the Coalition.

"German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel on Monday called his Turkish counterpart to express concerns about the possible impact on civilians of a Turkish offensive in northern Syria, as pressure mounted for him to reject arms sales sought by Ankara." (Reuters, n.54, Andrea Shalal, reporting from Berlin for Reuters).

The variety of sources cited helped the news outlet to depict a more international scenario and confirmed the more international approach to the conflict adopted by Reuters in all the stories published, reflecting the news outlet's standards, guidelines and journalistic culture. Global Voices and SNHR, on the other hand, did not publish stories where the international relations frame emerged.

The sources used in stories which had a dominant *humanitarian* frame were a large range of sources, from officials and spokesmen to local sources, NGOs, UN organisations and civilians. The frame was therefore approached and reported on from a variety of angles, focusing on different perspectives on the same topic, depending on a news outlet's guidelines and standards. The selection of the sources was not a clear marker that supported me in identifying the frame, although the variety of sources and their perspective about the topic did enable me to identify the differences among news outlets' coverage of the humanitarian theme.

SANA mainly relied on officials and local reporters as sources for the stories where the humanitarian frame emerged. Strongly influenced by the government's propaganda, SANA usually approached the topic in order to condemn terrorists' actions against civilians:

"Terrorist organisations deliberately plant landmines and improvised explosive devices prior to their withdrawal from areas and villages and this causes casualties among the citizens." (SANA, n.63, SANA's reporter)

"Pushed by hatred and supported by US occupation forces, QSD militias had handcuffed and beat the old man on his head with their weapons, leaving him bleeding to death". (SANA, n.269, local sources).

The sources used by SANA also enhanced the efforts of the government and its allies to support the population, as for instance, reporting about humanitarian aid including food baskets, provided by the Russian government, which was distributed by Daraa governorate to 400 of the displaced and martyrs' families in Karfa town (SANA, n. 65, Awad Sweidan, Daara Governorate) or the setting up, by the Syrian authorities, of three humanitarian corridors to receive civilians wishing to leave areas under the control of terrorists (SANA, n. 322, SANA's reporter). SANA also cited UN sources in some stories, although in these cases the rebuilding frame was usually also present:

“Governor of Hama Mohammad al-Hazouri discussed with the WHO’s Resident Representative Elizabeth Hoff ways to enhance cooperation between the two sides and the existing projects to improve the health, living and social services for citizens, especially those affected by the crisis.” (SANA, n.8)

The sources’ contributions highlighted the will of the Syrian government to help its population and improve life conditions in the controlled areas. The selection of sources as well as the topic treated highlighted that SANA’s journalistic choice was to cover the humanitarian tragedy mainly from a local point of view, citing external sources only when reporting about initiatives led by its allies and the UN.

NCS, similarly to SANA, mainly selected sources among officials and humanitarian organisations. The influence of Syrian Coalition and activism might have been a factor in the choice of NCS to publish stories about the humanitarian tragedy to push the international community to intervene, in order to support the population and the revolution. The sources cited accused the Assad regime of blocking aid deliveries and of tightening the siege on civilians with the aim of displacing the local population and changing the demographic landscape in Syria (NCS, n.14, Syrian Coalition Media Dept.). The sources used by NCS also accused Assad’s allies of being responsible for the humanitarian tragedy:

“Russia and its forces deployed in the region are directly responsible for the blockade and the humanitarian disaster as well as the worsening humanitarian situation causing diseases and hunger especially among children, women and the elderly.” (NCS, n. 23, Administration of Rubkan camp).

NCS also used sources to provide data about the situation in Syria, citing the reports of humanitarian organisations, in order to show the scale of the humanitarian tragedy. The sources were therefore key to highlight the tone of the stories:

“The monitoring group pointed out that Russian airstrikes targeted civilian areas on more than 1,083 occasions, destroying 201 schools, 190 healthcare centres, and 56 popular markets. Moreover, the Russian and regime attacks displaced 3.3 million people from their homes in the reporting period.” (NCS, n.181, SNHR reporter).

“Thousands of children due to start the school year in north-western Syria may not have access to education due to the latest escalation in violence and the Assad regime’s and Russian bombing campaign which has been ongoing for over four months.” (NCS, n.100, Save the Children).

Like SANA, NCS used the statements of the WHO, in this case to condemn the action of Syrian regime and its allies:

“The targeted facilities included four hospitals and two primary health care centres that were functional at the time they were hit. One primary health care centre had been previously evacuated in advance of military action. At least two injuries were reported, and two facilities were destroyed, the statement said. (NCS, n.96, WHO).

In contrast to the article mentioned above (SANA, n.8) where WHO was the main source, the rebuilding frame was not present, although NCS used this declaration to raise concern about the situation in Syria. The tone and the context of the article set by the contribution of sources helped me to identify the political and power frame in the background, as the implicit goal of the news outlet was to provoke a response by the international community, in order to support the Coalition.

Reuters, on the other hand, mainly used UN officials as main sources in the stories where the humanitarian frame was present. The sources selected, including the UNCHR, WHO and UN, were therefore a clear marker to identify the humanitarian frame, and they mainly focused on the attacks launched against civilians, on the life conditions of refugees and on the failure of ceasefire agreements:

“Russian jets and Syrian artillery have pounded towns and villages in a renewed assault backed by pro-Iranian militias and aimed at clearing the opposition. This latest wave of displacement compounds an already dire humanitarian situation on the ground in Idlib.” (Reuters, n.264, David Swanson, Amman-based U.N. regional spokesman for Syria)

“The delivery of food and other items covers the needs of around 10,000 households in the makeshift Rubkan camp, where conditions are described as desperate” (Reuters, n.11, Senior UN source).

“United Nations human rights chief Michelle Bachelet called on Friday for an immediate cessation of hostilities in Syria’s opposition-held Idlib province, saying the latest ceasefire attempt had yet again failed to protect civilians”. (Reuters, n.265)

Reuters also gathered contributions from officials (especially from Western countries), but did not include civilian sources in its stories. The humanitarian topic was therefore treated mainly through the angle of the western world, reporting about the humanitarian strategy through the UN sources, but also focusing on the world’s powers commitment to the humanitarian cause.

“Arrest, torture and killings continue to this very day. Detention by the Syrian security agencies is so arbitrary that no refugee can ultimately be sure of a safe return” (Reuters, n.170, French and German diplomats, Bruno Foucher and Georg Birgelen).

“UNHCR should have a bigger presence inside Syria to observe and help refugees returning from abroad. Without that, there is an element of confidence that is missing in the return of the people”. (Reuters, n.170, Filippo Grandi).

In analysing Reuters stories, sourcing played a key role, as it was a clear marker to identify the humanitarian frame. The presence of UN-related sources was a sure sign.

In the stories published by SNHR, the humanitarian frame was the one which emerged the most, mainly due to the presence of many SNHR direct sources on the ground. The sources selected by SNHR were mainly local reporters and SNHR’s personnel on the ground, who directly contributed to the stories shared by the outlet. However, the sources’ contribution was minimal, as they just reported the facts without sharing their angles or perspectives. This reflected SNHR guidelines and standards, as the news outlet focused on gathering data and reporting facts as they were. The sources were therefore useful markers although the context and the topic of the stories were key to identify the humanitarian frame, which appears to be always present in SNHR’s articles.

“Random camps set up for IDPs from the suburbs of Hama and Idlib due to Syrian- Russian alliance forces attacks” (SNHR, n. 12, M. Al Abdullah)

“Syrian regime missile launcher shelled near a fire truck and a service car of civil defence in Jisr al Shoghour city in Idlib governorate western suburbs” (SNHR, n.64, SNHR reporter)

“Syrian Democratic forces artillery fired two shells near al Urouba School in the middle of Afrin city in the northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate” (SNHR, n.236, SNHR reporter)

“Russian forces killed two civilians from the same family in al Jena village in Aleppo” (SNHR, n.383, SNHR reporter)

SNHR gathered the contribution of its sources, reporting the violations and the attacks launched by all the parties involved in the conflict, without being influenced by propaganda or activism. However, the personal angle was left out, while it was the core of the stories published by Global Voices.

Global Voices, in the stories where I was able to identify the humanitarian frame, selected civilian sources. However, the presence of civilian sources was not a clear marker, as the news outlet mostly relied on civilian contributions in the majority of its stories. On the other hand, civilian sources provided a new perspective about the humanitarian theme especially by telling their own stories:

“When the SDF and the international coalition attacked the city, we were forced to leave. However, we couldn't leave at the beginning of the fight, because ISIS used us as human shields. I lost one of my sons while we were trying to flee the city in the Shahdah district when a landmine exploded” (Global Voices, n.5, Abu Fares, civilian).

The context of the story clearly was a marker for the humanitarian frame, however, the sources' selection was key to provide a more personal angle to the article, as they described their direct experiences and daily life.

The sources used in stories which had a dominant *civilian* frame were civilian sources, the most used source by news outlets. They were a key marker to identify the frame. However, the context of the stories as well as the tone of the articles were also fundamental to pin down the main frame. In fact, civilian sources were also used in stories where the main frame was the political and power frame, as shown above,

therefore sourcing analysis supported me in identifying the civilian frame, but I had to take into consideration other factors as well.

SANA and NCS used civilian sources especially in stories where the civilian, the rebuilding and the political and power frames emerged, therefore it was sometimes difficult to identify the main one. However, in SANA's stories where I identified the civilian frame, the main focus was on facts related to civilian's initiatives or daily life, such as attending the Homs Shopping Festival, where 'citizens expressed their satisfaction and admiration of the festival, which revives the commercial movement, supports economy and provides various goods that meet the Syrian family needs' (SANA, n.288); or celebrating military victories where civilians 'saluted men of the army who record the heroic legends to liberate Syria's soil from dirtiness of terrorism' (SANA, n.373). In SANA's article n.373 the influence of propaganda was evident. In the stories published by NCS, the contribution of civilian sources usually was linked to the political issues, even if the main frame emerging was the civilian frame. The main topics were usually demonstrations against difficult life conditions, however the political and power frame was usually present, as the cause of the protests were linked to the policies adopted by the government:

"Local activists of residents to hold a sit-in protest in the Seir Square in central Suwaida under the title 'We want to live' to protest against the dire economic conditions." (NCS, n.209, Syrian National Coalition's Media Dept.).

"Syrians complain of the high prices of basic commodities as a result of the downward spiral of the Syrian pound against the US dollar. The economic meltdown came as a direct result of the erroneous monetary policies of the Assad regime government" (NCS, n. Syrian National Coalition's Media Dept.).

NCS rarely relied on civilian sources that directly told their own experience about war zones or detention. In these cases, the civilian frame emerged as the main one, although the humanitarian and the political and power frames were present as well. Therefore, the sources told their own story from their own angle, but the influence of activism was still relevant, as the goal of the testimony might be to push the international community to intervene in Syria:

“A female survivor from the prisons of the Assad regime recounted the horrors taking place in these prisons at a meeting between the Syrian National Coalition and envoys and diplomats from the major actors and influential countries in Syria, including the United States and the European Union.” (NCS, n. 253).

Reuters, on the other hand, rarely relied on civilian sources, mainly selecting élite sources to be cited in their stories. Therefore, the presence of civilians’ contributions in Reuters stories were key markers to identify the civilian frame. The sources contributed in presenting a glimpse of their daily life in Syria, approaching a large variety of themes, from attending school in Syria, to their tragic experience as civilians in areas controlled by the IS:

“Omar al-Tawil, a 15-year-old school boy in Damascus, is one of 24,000 Syrian youngsters now learning Russian at school after the country added the language of the government’s most powerful ally to the curriculum. ‘At first we didn’t understand anything and when we first heard the words we started to laugh...it was hard,’ said Tawil. ‘The teachers are helping us to love this language’.” (Reuters, n.257)

“‘They took women, abused them and killed them’, said Omar, describing how jihadists bought and sold their Yazidi captives or passed them around as sexual slaves. ‘A woman was shifted from one man to another unless it was to one who had a bit of mercy... if she was in good condition, she would carry on. If not, she would get married to avoid being abused,’ she said.” (Reuters, n.144)

In Reuters stories where the civilian frame was dominant, I was usually able to highlight the presence of the humanitarian frame.

SNHR and Global Voices mainly selected civilian sources in their stories, as stated before, but their use of sources was completely different. In SNHR stories, civilian sources were a clear marker to identify the civilian frame. The point of view of the sources as well as their perspective about the conflict, or the humanitarian issues was not taken into consideration:

“Fire broke out in al Nour IDPs Camp located in Sejjo area in the northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate. The fire also resulted in the burning of more than ten tents of IDPs.” (SNHR, 437, civilian source).

“Huge damage in several camps of IDPs from Hama governorate eastern which are located in Atma IDPs Camps Complex at Syrian- Turkish border in Idlib governorate northern suburbs, where tens of tents drowned as result of heavy rain in the area.” (SNHR, n.184, civilian source).

“Two tents, in al Mohammadiya IDPs Camp near Jandaris town which is administratively a part of Afrin city in Aleppo governorate northern suburbs, were burned in a fire broke out in a tent due to improper use of heating” (SNHR, n.41, civilian source).

In SNHR stories the humanitarian frame was always present as it represented the main focus of the news outlet.

On the other hand, Global Voices strongly relied on civilians’ contributions in all stories published. Therefore, to identify the civilian frame I had to look more at the context and the topic of the article. The conflict and the humanitarian themes were always present, however, the main focus was people’s experiences and visions of the conflict, so I identified the civilian frame as the main one:

“Rashwan Abdelbaki: The war has had a negative impact on everyone, especially economically and security-wise, prompting many to leave the country in search of new opportunities. After my graduation from college in Syria, my primary interest was music, exploring the relationship between the musician and the instrument. At the time, my art was filled with music, joy, light, and theatre. But in 2011, I started to feel the changes that war brought to my country. On a personal level and as an artist, the war confused a lot of ideas within me, and my vision of things changed. I began to think more about the dangers that threaten our common humanity. My focus shifted to questions regarding the negative effects of racism, religion, and politics that are all striving to divide and destroy our faith in humanity.” (Global Voices, n.12).

The selection of sources used by the news outlets in the stories published supported the framing analysis set out in the following chapter, but it also was a trigger which led me to analyse in greater depth the context of the stories, along with the news agency's potential agenda and the way the articles might have been influenced by activism, propaganda, policy or other external factors.

SANA and Reuters, on 9th January 2018, published two articles about the same topic, the Israeli attacks on Syrian territory. The only source cited by SANA were officials of the Syrian Arab Army (SANA, n.38), referred to as the General Command. On the other hand, Reuters collected statements from different sources, from the Syrian Military to the Israeli Prime Minister and also a European diplomat (Reuters, n.15).

The sources used in the stories were a marker to identify the conflict frame as the main one, but they also gave an insight into the context and the factors that might have influenced the reporting. SANA only used one source which warned "against the dangerous repercussions of such hostile acts, holding Israel fully responsible for their consequences and affirming its high alert to confront such attacks, continue war against terrorism and to eradicate Israel's terrorist tools to restore security and stability to all the Syrian territories." (SANA, n.38)

On the other hand, Reuters used Israeli military as a source reporting about Israel's intent to 'prevent Syrian territory being used for Iran to set up bases or transfer high-quality weaponry to Lebanon's Hezbollah group,' it also cited Syrian Military, Israeli Prime Minister who declared 'We back it up as necessary action' (Reuters, n.15). Along with a European diplomat who stated 'I don't think that has happened very much up till now and that is a source of concern' (Reuters, n.15).

SANA, using a single source, reported the story from a limited point of view, portraying Israel as the enemy, a choice reflecting the influence of government policy and a history of war. Reuters chose to use different sources, reporting the story from different perspectives also trying to better conceptualise the story, while giving more space to 'Western' sources.

My sourcing analysis therefore helped me to identify the main frame, but also supported me in determining other factors that enriched the news framing analysis and contributed to its depth.

The point of view emerging from the contribution of the selected sources in different stories also supported the analysis of frames.

This was especially the case with Global Voices and SNHR stories, where the personal perspective and the tone of the sources cited in the articles were key in identifying the main frame of the story. In most of SNHR articles, the main themes were related to conflict, however, the sources cited, which were usually SNHR officials or civilians on the ground, provided contributions that were focused on humanitarian issues:

“Incendiary weapons fired by Russian forces on M’arshourin village” (SNHR, n.13, SNHR reporter)

“Syrian regime forces artillery fired shells near al Hasan and al Hussein Mosque in al Hawija village in Sahl al Ghab area in Hama governorate western suburbs” (SNHR, n.158, anonymous Syrian civilian)

As the main focus of SNHR was the Syrian humanitarian crisis, they were more interested in reporting about actions that might put civilians in danger, destroy their homes, or kill them. Therefore, the tone used by the sources cited in their stories as well as the point of view which always emerged in their contributions, supported me in categorising these articles under the humanitarian frame.

Global Voices had a different approach, as reporters relied on the contribution of their sources to tell the story. The sources’ point of view was essentially part of the features, so it was important to identify their perspective in order to identify the main frame. Most of the stories published by Global Voices approached themes related to the conflict. However, usually the main frame that emerged was the civilian frame, as the sources, mostly civilians, told their own stories, looking at the conflict from their personal perspective:

“When the SDF and the international coalition attacked the city, we were forced to leave. However, we couldn't leave at the beginning of the fight, because ISIS used us as human shields. I lost one of my sons while we were trying to flee the city in the Shahdah district when a landmine exploded” (Abu Fares, civilian, Global Voices, n.5).

3.5 Conclusion

The sourcing analysis highlighted that the news outlets examined in my study often used sources in different ways.

SANA and NCS used sources whose contributions could suit their own perspective about the war, influenced respectively by Syrian government propaganda and by the Syrian Coalition's activism in support of the Revolution. They mainly used a unilateral approach in reporting the conflict. In fact, as official news outlets of the Syrian government and the Syrian Coalition, they were consistent in following the agendas of those in power.

SANA mainly focused on the rebuilding process, the policies adopted by the government to support the economic and political growth of Syria, international relations and the victories of the Syrian Army against 'terrorists' and the crimes committed by those who were considered rebels. On the other hand, NCS highlighted the ideals of the revolution, trying to promote its cause to the world powers in order to gain support and acknowledgement by the international community, condemning the actions of the Syrian government and its allies (also called 'terrorists'). The influence exerted by activism and propaganda was therefore always present in the stories published.

Reuters approached the reporting of the war from a multilateral perspective, using a large variety of sources that could provide their own contribution to the coverage of the conflict. The news outlet reported the conflict from different angles in an attempt to provide a complete picture of the war. It mainly focused on political relations and responses of the world powers involved in the conflict, but it also approached the humanitarian issue and the rebuilding process of the country. However, the Western perspective is always present in its stories. Reuters approached different themes and used the contributions of various sources, but the conflict was always seen through a Western lens and this factor also led the news outlet to cover and analyse, sometimes implicitly, possible implications for the Western powers and the changes among their relations with Syria and its allies, especially Russia.

SNHR, as also stated on its webpage, was solely interested in reporting about the humanitarian crisis in Syria and about war crimes and attacks against the civilians by different sides involved. Therefore, the main sources used in the stories are direct testimonies of civilians and contributions provided by SNHR personnel working on the

ground. The approach adopted by SNHR could be considered as one-sided, as the war is covered only through the humanitarian perspective. The purpose of the news outlet appears to have been to gather as much data as possible about the humanitarian conditions of refugees and civilians and reporting about casualties among the population, condemning the actions of the different sides involved in the conflict. In my study, I found that the information gathered by SNHR was also used by other news outlets and SNHR itself was used as a reliable source.

Global Voices tried to cover the conflict from a completely different perspective, namely from the angle of civilians and people, including refugees, soldiers and even local reporters. Various sources were used in the stories published and selected from each macro-category previously identified. Global Voices reported about the war using the contribution of the people who were directly experiencing it, from their daily routines to the problems they had to face every day. The theme of the war is always present in the stories published. However, the main focus is on the people and their personal perspectives about, and experiences of, the war. The approach of the news outlet to conflict reporting might be described as multilateral, however humanitarian-civilian based.

Generally, the sourcing analysis confirmed my initial suppositions. The news outlets strongly relied on the contribution of stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists who reported from the warzones and were able to gain access to sources who directly experienced the conflict, such as civilians, refugees and soldiers. The news outlets were therefore able to gather information from sources that would otherwise have been difficult to reach. On the other hand, élite sources still played a fundamental role, spokesmen and officials were used as the main sources in many articles and news stories, as they were more accessible and easily verifiable. I also noticed that the use of military sources was limited and even in stories where the conflict was the main theme, the news outlets chose to cite officials or spokesmen instead of people directly involved in the fighting, such as military staff members, soldiers or militia. This fact might be due to the difficulty in accessing these sources by the reporters working on the ground and to the reluctance of the military to speak with reporters about military issues and objectives. SANA and NCS were in fact the only news agencies that gained access respectively to Syrian Army officials and Free Syrian Army representatives. In addition,

as the war started in 2011, in the timeframes studied between 2018 and 2020, the focus switched from reporting the actual conflict to covering the humanitarian crisis and analysing the relations among the powers involved in the war. This led the news outlets to gradually downplay the contribution of military sources in favour of civilians, officials from world powers or humanitarian organisations.

Chapter 4 - News framing analysis

4.1 Introduction

As shown previously, in my pilot study, I was able to identify six major frames emerging from the stories analysed by the five different news organisations:

- SANA (official Syrian government news outlet)
- Reuters
- SNHR
- Global Voices
- National Coalition of Syrians (NCS, official Syrian Coalition news outlet)

The news outlets focused on different topics and the frames that I was able to identify in the stories published by each of them were closely linked to their interests, journalistic agenda, and external influences.

Going through the news framing analysis, I was able to determine that the humanitarian frame strongly prevailed over the other frames. This might have been due to the fact that the conflict devastated the country from 2011 to 2024, and the main focus had switched to the humanitarian crisis affecting the Syrian population and refugees, forced to leave their homes or to live in war zones or areas occupied by the IS. The humanitarian frame therefore reached its peak in March 2019 and January 2020, respectively with the fighting against the IS and the launch of a major military offensive by the Syrian government against the FSA in the northwest of the country. The conflict frame which might have been expected to be dominant, as the war was still raging in the whole country, remained relatively stable throughout the time periods analysed, with a peak in January 2018, when the Syrian Army was in the middle of a major offensive against the FSA to take over its strongholds.

It was interesting to analyse the trends of the political and power frame along with the international relations frame, as shown in the graphs below. Their incidence increased when the country gained stability and it was possible to focus on negotiating with the international community, world powers, different sides involved in the conflict as well as working on political strategies and plans. On the other hand, when the humanitarian

frame took over (March 2019 and January 2020), these frames' percentages immediately decreased as journalistic interest switched over to humanitarian and conflict-based issues. The same trend was followed, on a smaller scale, by the rebuilding frame, which was also related to the stability of the country and therefore strongly emerged when it seemed that the war was going to end and it was possible to look towards a new beginning for Syria and its people. The rebuilding frame therefore peaked in January 2018, when the Syrian Army was about to overcome FSA, so the government had the opportunity to focus on strategies to rebuild infrastructure, basic services, a shared national conscience and organise the return of refugees. In September 2019, after the defeat of the IS and before the Turkish invasion of northern Syria, the same situation occurred, leading to another growth of the rebuilding frame. On the other hand, in March 2019 and January 2020, due respectively to the fighting against the IS and the launch of major attacks by the Syrian government backed up by Russia, against rebel groups in northern Syria, the rebuilding frame percentages dropped in favour of humanitarian and conflict frames.

In the time tranches analysed, the civilian frame strongly emerged in September 2019, after the defeat of IS, when many civilians, finally freed from IS domination, were able to tell their stories and talk about their life under the IS regime. In January 2020 the civilian frame also strongly emerged, although it was especially linked to the protests against the Golan Heights occupation by Israel, officially recognised by the US government. I had initially taken into consideration the health frame in light of the Covid-19 virus at the beginning of 2020, but was only able to find two articles about this topic. The analysis of this frame was therefore not significant for my research project and I decided to not proceed with it.

Table 6. Frames as a percentage of total stories during different time tranches³²

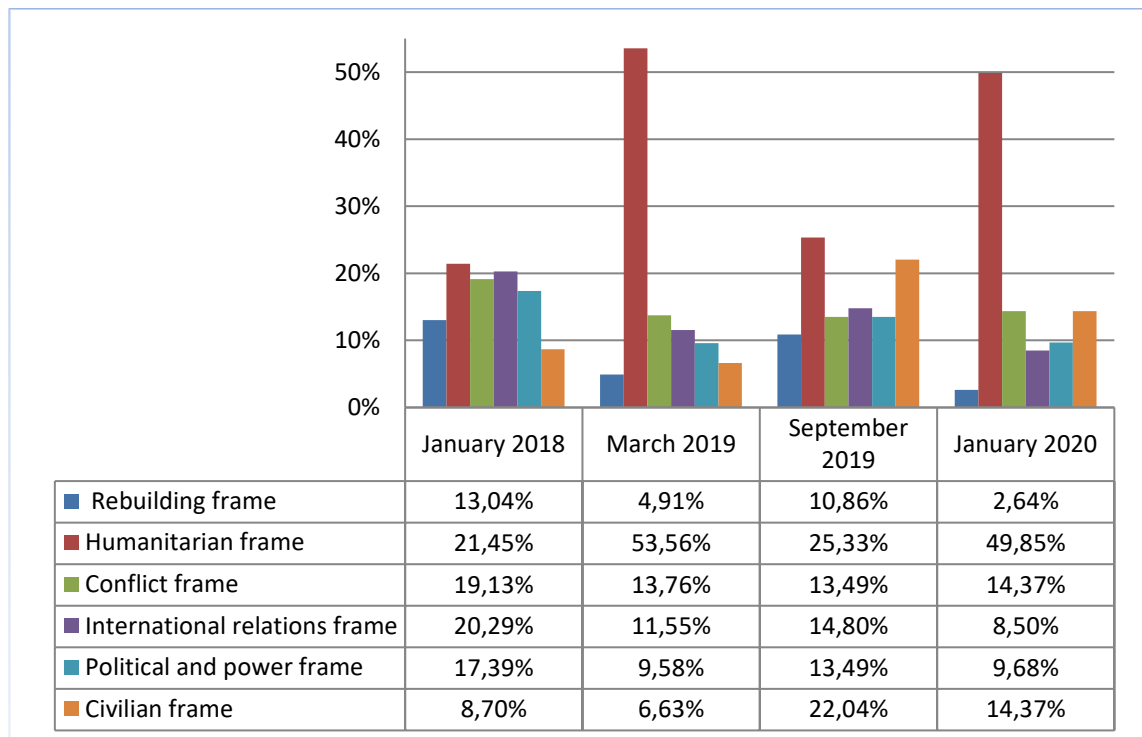
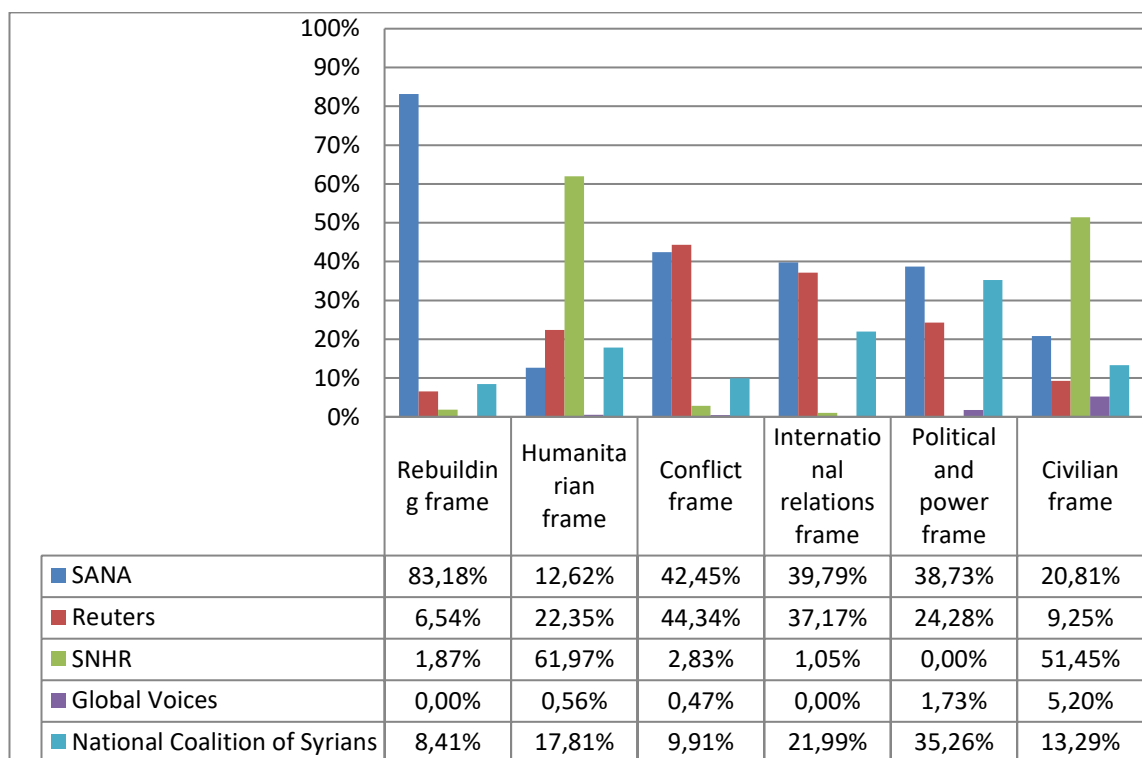


Table 7. Main users of the different frames³³



In the following sections I analyse in greater depth the six frames identified during the news framing study.

³² See Appendix E

³³ See Appendix E

4.2 Rebuilding frame

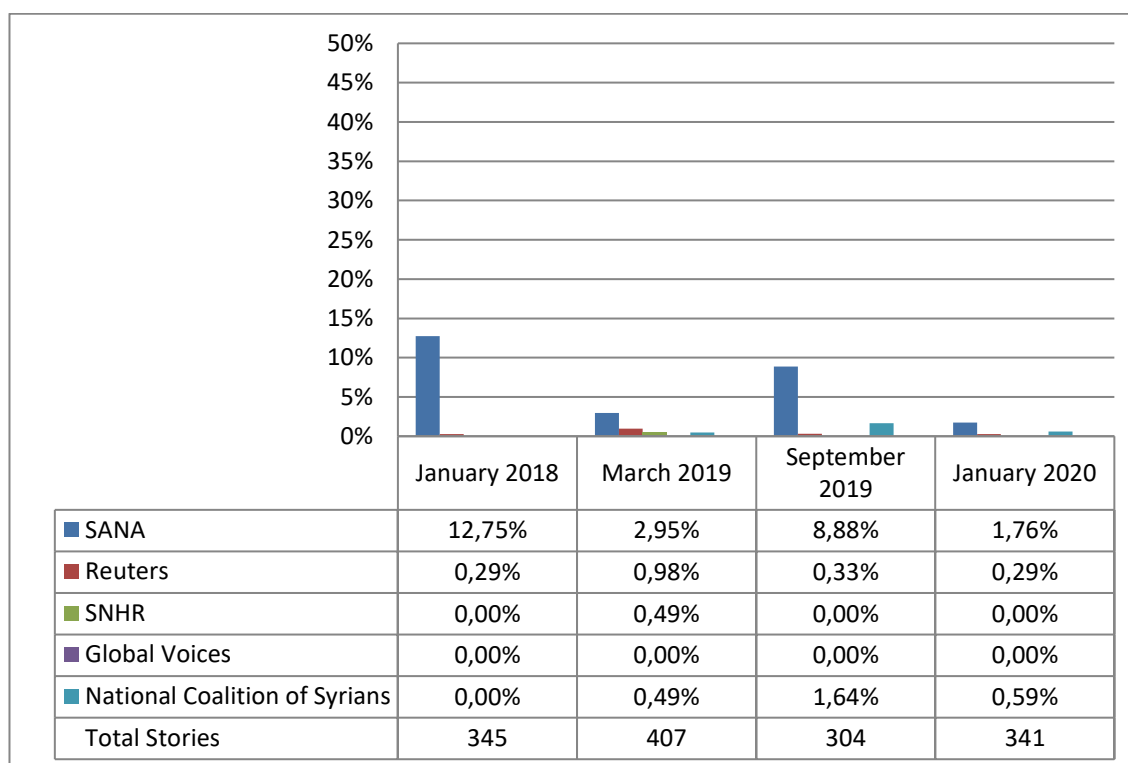
4.2a Introduction

I identified as 'rebuilding' those frames which were generally linked to topics that focus on the process of economic and political rebuilding and the restoration of Syria as a nation with shared identity

The concept of 'rebuilding' can be summarised on one level as physically rebuilding the infrastructure destroyed by the war, from houses to industrial plants. But it could also be linked to a moral and psychological dimension, so I interpreted this as the process that a country had to face to rebuild national identity, a national conscience after a civil war. This concept included allowing and supporting the return of the refugees to their houses and rebuilding the relations among the internal parties who fought in the war.

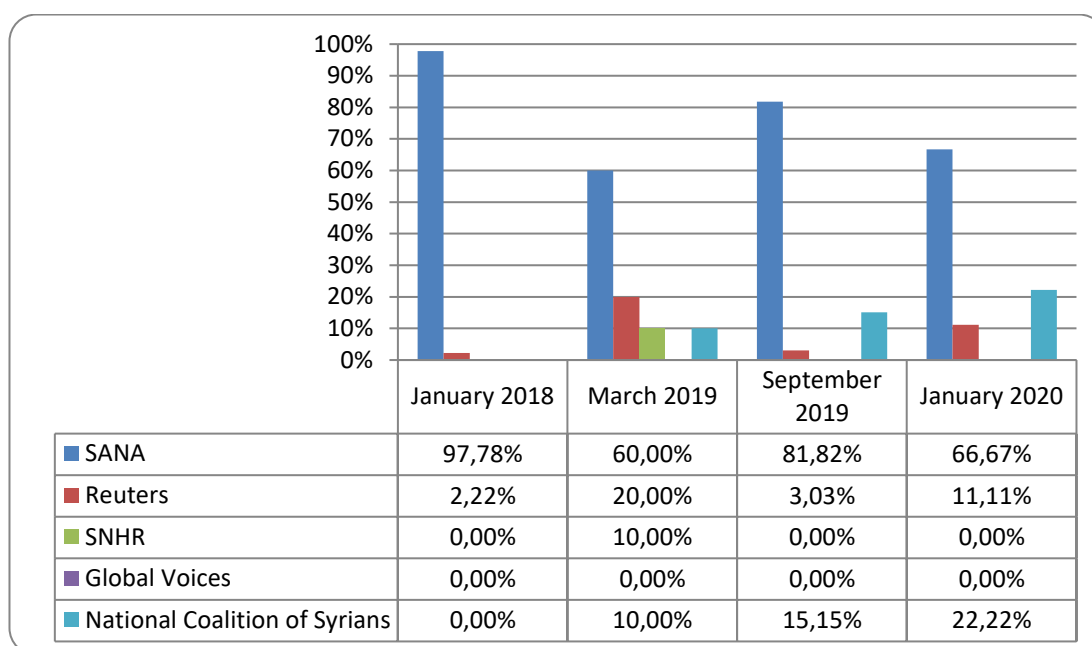
Most of the news stories in which I was able to pin down this frame were published by SANA, especially in January 2018 and September 2019.

Table 8. Rebuilding frame as a percentage of total stories by news outlets during time tranches³⁴



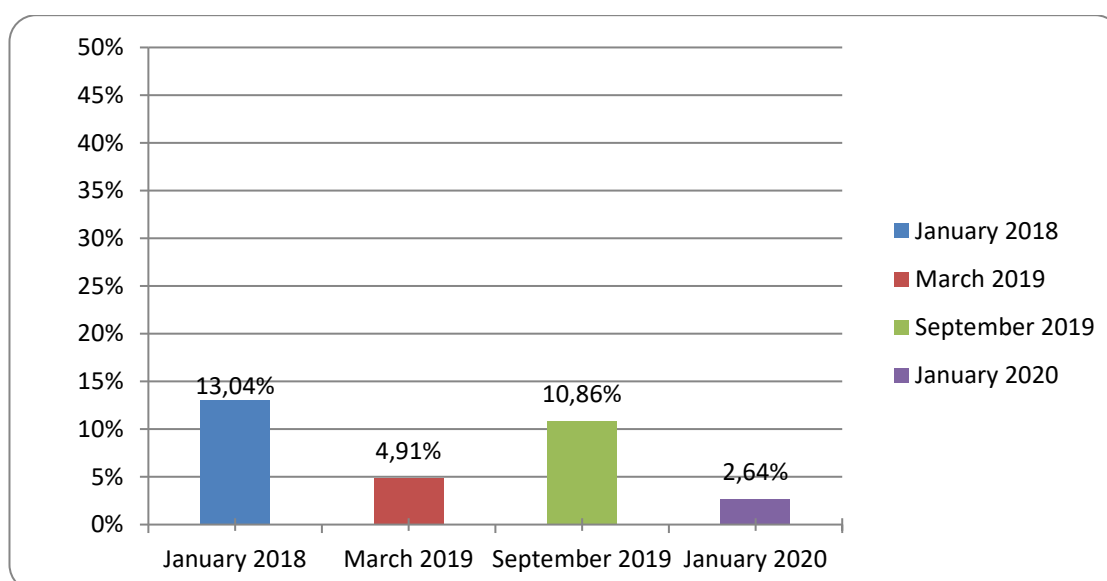
³⁴ See Appendix E

Table 9. Rebuilding frames emerged in relation to the news stories published by news agencies taken into consideration different time tranches³⁵



4.2b Analysis of the rebuilding frame

Table 10. Percentage of rebuilding frame stories in each time tranche



I started my research by analysing the news stories published in January 2018, when, as a result of the Syrian Army's successful military operations against the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Islamic State, the conflict seemed to be slowly coming to an end.

The majority of the news stories actually focused on the attack of the Turkish Army against the Kurds (especially in Afrin), the fighting going on in Eastern Goutha and Idlib between the Syrian Army and the FSA, along with the humanitarian issues that were

³⁵ See Appendix E

directly afflicting Syrian people and refugees. During this specific time tranche, frames not related to humanitarian issues and conflict, such as the international relations frames, the political and power frame and the rebuilding frame (as shown in the graph above), were able to come into the spotlight. In the other time periods under consideration, they would be relegated to a more complementary role, with the conflict frame and especially the humanitarian frame playing a central role.

As soon as I started the news framing analysis, I noticed that the rebuilding frame mainly emerged in stories published by the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) which, especially in January 2018, greatly focused on the theme of the economic and political reconstruction of the country, along with the return of the refugees to their homes, the strengthening of diplomatic relations with Syrian allies, different foreign countries and the international community.

In the stories published by SANA, journalists usually focused on the direct intervention of government officials, citing their statements as main sources as shown in my sourcing analysis:

“Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources, Ali Ghanem - said that the government is keen on restoring normal life. ‘[...] The delegation, [...] inspected the implemented works in the framework of the reconstruction process and the rehabilitation of infrastructure in the province’” (SANA n.134).

I was therefore able to identify some specific lexical choices such as *reconstruction*, *restoring*, *normal life*, *rehabilitation*, *implementation*, which were repeatedly used in many articles published by SANA and which allowed me to immediately identify them as specific indicators of the rebuilding frame. In other cases, it was not so easy to look for such indicators, therefore I had to rely more on the context of the story, the sources, the non-written media content (videos and photos) and even the headline of the news stories to identify the main frame.

In an article headlined ‘Means to overcome obstacles hindering industry sector discussed’ (SANA, n.127), I had to choose whether to categorise it under the political and power frame or the rebuilding frame. So the section:

“Minister Yousef stressed the Ministry’s readiness to coordinate with all ministries and parties concerned to provide assistance and support industrialists in order to upgrade the national industry” (SANA, n.127)

...played a central role in helping me to identify the rebuilding frame. In fact, I pinned down the lexical indicators *assistance*, *support*, *national Industry*, but the context and the tone of the stories, which insisted on the necessity of supporting the industrial sector in order help rebuild the Syrian economy, were the key factors that helped me identify the rebuilding frame emerging in the story.

On the other hand, in the news stories and articles published by the other news outlets, the rebuilding frame did not have such relevance. They mostly reported about Syria as a highly unstable country, where the conflict was still raging and civilians were living in a situation characterised by the need for humanitarian help and constant danger, especially in the war zones.

In fact, taking into consideration the news stories where I was able to identify the rebuilding frame, only 2% were published by Reuters, Global Voices, NCS and SNHR; in March 2019 this data increased to 40% (out of only 20 news stories in total), while it dropped to 18% in September 2019 (out of 33 articles) and then grew again to 33% (out of 9 news stories) in January 2020.

While SANA presented different factors and aspects that actively contributed to the rebuilding of the country, the other news agencies mainly focused on the refugees returning home. Reuters published a news story in March 2019, where Filippo Grandi from UNHCR stated that ‘It is important that in areas of return, organisations like UNHCR are present and can observe the return, can have access to the returnees and can help them address some of the problems they face’, because, as reported:

“The front lines appear stable for now between government territory and two big enclaves in the north and east still outside Damascus’s control [...] Many Syrians scattered within and outside the country [...] are now considering whether to go home” (Reuters, n. 146).

The humanitarian issue was present in the background and the tone used by the author was cautious due to possible future implications and facts that might change the whole

scenario. However, it was possible to identify the rebuilding frame thanks to the context and to phrases such as *stable frontline*, *areas of return*, indicating that the situation was under control. Therefore, it was possible to think about supporting refugees' return. I then categorised the primary frame emerging from this story under rebuilding, as it insisted on the possibility of a safe return for the refugees as well as on the fact that the frontline was stable:

“President Bashar al-Assad now controls most of Syria and the front lines appear stable for now between government territory and two big enclaves in the north and east” (Reuters, n. 146).

However, it was important to note that the story insisted on the fact that the return had to be organised and controlled by UN organisations. This fact highlighted that, as opposed to SANA, Western news outlets were not fully convinced about the situation in Syria and were waiting for future developments:

“It is important that in areas of return, organisations like UNHCR are present and can observe the return, can have access to the returnees and can help them address some of the problems they face” (Reuters, n. 146)

SANA also insisted on this theme in many of its stories. The tone, on the other hand, was different, emphasising the support provided by the Syrian government to the refugees:

“Scores of displaced families return to Deir Ezzor Province daily transported on board buses via land roads that link the province with different areas across the country benefiting from the situation of security and stability” (SANA, n.117)

The focus was also on the restoration of life as normal and how glad refugees were to be able to return to their houses:

“The facilitations provided by governmental bodies [...] have helped in bringing normal life back to Deir Ezzor City as citizens started to return to their homes and jobs after providing the basic services again, opening roads and rehabilitating many infrastructures destroyed by terrorists” (SANA, n.117).

It was also possible to identify different frame indicators (*reconstruction services, happiness, jobs, working side by side*) in SANA's story, along with a more optimistic general context which contributed to building the overall tone of the story:

"Employees resumed their work again in an effective contribution to starting the reconstruction process and activating different institutional sectors to provide their services to the citizens. The displaced citizens who returned to the province expressed happiness to return to their homes and jobs in their city [...] affirming readiness to work side by side for reconstructing the city" (SANA, n.117).

SANA's approach to reporting the return of the refugees changed in March 2019, due to the rise of IS during 2018, which was engaged in fighting by both the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) and the Syrian Army. It was possible to notice that the coverage was less enthusiastic and more aimed at reporting the facts. However, the influence of propaganda was still present as highlighted by the word *terrorism*.

"A new batch of Syrians who had been displaced due to terrorism returned home from refugee camps in Jordan via Nassib border crossing with Jordan to be transported with their belongings to their villages and towns, which have been liberated from terrorism by the Syrian Arab Army" (SANA, n. 211).

My research shows that the decline in the incidence of this frame tended to reflect the trend of the conflict, which subsequently developed into a series of proxy wars and brought still greater instability in the country. In addition, the failure of the 2018 demilitarisation agreement³⁶, played a fundamental role in slowing down the rebuilding process.

However, in some news stories which reported on the reconstruction process, started in the areas of Syria liberated from IS, it was still possible to notice the optimistic tone adopted by SANA back in 2018, as well as the lexical indicators which characterised the rebuilding frame:

³⁶ The Idlib demilitarization was an agreement between Turkey and Russia to create a demilitarized zone (DMZ) in Syria's rebel-held Idlib Governorate, to be patrolled by military forces from Russia and Turkey. On 17 September 2018, the Russian president Vladimir Putin and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, reached an agreement to create a buffer zone in Idlib

“A notable improvement has been witnessed in the area with regard to the services provided to the locals, particularly in the sectors of electricity, water and cleanliness. [...] The mayor noted that three schools have been also rehabilitated in cooperation with different bodies, adding that work is underway for rehabilitating the main road of the town.” (SANA, n. 183).

The concept of rebuilding that emerged from SANA news stories was completely different to the idea that could be identified in the articles published by SNHR and National Coalition of Syrians. Even though the interests of these news agencies were more based on political and humanitarian issues, I was able to pin down the rebuilding frame in some of the news stories posted on their websites.

SNHR, as previously explained, is an independent human rights organisation, therefore its primary focus was to report about humanitarian crises, war crimes and human rights violations. However, I was able to identify the rebuilding frame in some news stories, where the main theme was the release of prisoners of war or political prisoners by the Syrian government or SDF.

“Ten detainees were released from detention centres of Syrian Democratic forces in Raqqa city, [...] according to an agreement between the forces and dignitaries of the Arab tribes in the area” (SNHR, reporter, n.106).

The main indicators were the words *released*, *dignitaries* and *agreement between*, which transmit an idea of improvement of relations among the parties involved in the conflict.

Analysing the stories published by SNHR was probably the most difficult part of this process, as they were short and the writing style was stripped of many words - they were more similar to Tweets than to actual news stories. It might be possible to categorise the totality of their stories under the humanitarian frame, which was clearly predominant. However, in some particular cases, the context and the tone of the story made me realise that the primary frame could be categorised as rebuilding, intended as restoring agreements and relations among the parties, or even rebuilding a national identity, although imposed through detention: ‘eight detainees were released from Syrian regime forces detention centres in Damascus city [...] most of whom served their sentences’ (SNHR, reporter, n. 224). In this case, the release of the people previously

detained could be compared to the return of the refugees to their houses, leading towards a gradual restoration of a divided country. Although it was clear that SNHR's main goal was to denounce violation, it was important to highlight that the release of political prisoners represented an important step towards the reconstruction of the country.

I was not able to identify the rebuilding frame in any of the stories published by Global Voices. It focused instead on the civilian theme, describing the lived experiences of those who suffered the most in the conflict and also trying to portray a more complete picture of the conflict, adding the civilians' perspective as a contribution.

The rebuilding frame emerged again in the stories published by National Coalition of Syrians (NCS, Official Revolution and Opposition Forces news agency), highlighting the key-role of the revolution in changing the country in order to rebuild a 'new' democratic Syria, a scenario where everyone was necessary to make this change possible. In the story published on 08/03/2019, International Women's Day, the Coalition's Vice-President Moussa stressed:

"The important role of Syrian women, especially in the political process and in negotiations as key to making Syria a place of safety and creating sustainable peace [...] She pointed out that these are the first steps towards bringing about a political transition to Syria that is based on justice, the rule of law, and equal citizenship for all Syrian citizens." (National Coalition of Syrians, n. 37).

In this story, the main indicators of the rebuilding frame could be identified in the words *sustainable peace, place of safety, political transition*. However, the political message of the revolution was clearly visible in the background.

This story highlighted the key role that women would play in the rebuilding process of the country and this was one of the main differences with the stories published by SANA, which rarely selected women as a main source and never pictured them as a key resource for the rebuilding process. On the other hand, the stories published by NCS displayed signs of revolutionary propaganda and their main goal was to gather support in order to support the revolution itself and end the humanitarian crisis:

“Moussa called on all women around the world to remember the suffering of the Syrian people; show solidarity with them; and to call on the international community to take the necessary steps to put an end to the tragedy that has been affecting Syrian civilians for nearly eight years” (National Coalition of Syrians, n. 37).

Just like SANA, NCS published stories on the restoration of basic services in ‘liberated’ areas –

‘Government’s plan of action is based on seeking effective performance on the ground through civil administration and good governance as well as on the consolidation of security and stability [...] SIG will spare no effort to provide essential services to the civilian population and to improve security’ (National Coalition of Syrians, n. 116).

They also focused on collaborating with the media in order to start a ‘Cooperation for the launch of media campaigns to confront the disinformation campaigns being launched by the Assad regime and Russia to discredit the Syrian revolution’ (National Coalition of Syrians, n.98). The media cooperation was a particular aspect of some stories that were also covered by SANA, but in a different way, reporting about foreign media delegations visiting the liberated areas, in order to show the world, the progress made by the government in the rebuilding process:

“A media delegation that comprises nearly 60 media outlets from Europe, Asia, and Latin America visited on Wednesday towns of Idlib southern countryside and Hama northern countryside to inspect the situation of these areas after they had been liberated from terrorism, and the basic services provided by government to the returnees (SANA, n. 275)”

Furthermore, NCS rarely approached the topic about the refugees’ return to their homes, which was, instead, one of the most treated topics by SANA, while NCS enhanced its collaboration with external organisations and projects, such as the Syria Recovery Trust Fund, in order to support the rebuilding process:

“The projects included providing support for the Syrian Civil Defence’s efforts to clear rubble and landmines from eight towns and villages in Aleppo province.

Funding was also provided to support a project to maintain the food warehouse and refrigerators of the local council in the town of Marea. SRTF Management Unit also approved funding for a project for mobile clinics and a clean water supply for rural communities in Raqqa province. The total value of these projects is approximately 8.3 million euros” (National Coalition of Syrians, n. 149).

It was therefore clear that these two agencies, finding themselves on opposite sides of the conflict, approached the rebuilding topic in similar ways and the indicators which marked the rebuilding frame were almost the same.

“The society has effectively participated in restoring normal life to the city through its voluntary teams since the first days of liberating the city [...] through providing the basic services for the returnees and it has worked on supporting the sustainable livelihood for the families. They added that the society helps the returning families to launch their projects and it provides job opportunities for the returnees based on the local resources and products” (SANA, n. 276).

Markers such as *restoring normal life*, *providing basic services*, *launch projects*, *providing job opportunities* could be found in both NCS and SANA stories, highlighting the presence of the rebuilding frame.

As stated before, the rebuilding frame mainly emerged in SANA stories, the agency which was more interested in treating this theme, probably due to its strict links to the Syrian government and its influence on SANA’s agenda and guidelines. The same aspects, from a different perspective, can be also found in NCS stories. Reuters and SNHR had a completely different approach to the topic, being more cautious and adopting a more objective perspective, less influenced by propaganda or activism and therefore more focused on the general context of the conflict.

4.3 Conflict frame

4.3a Introduction

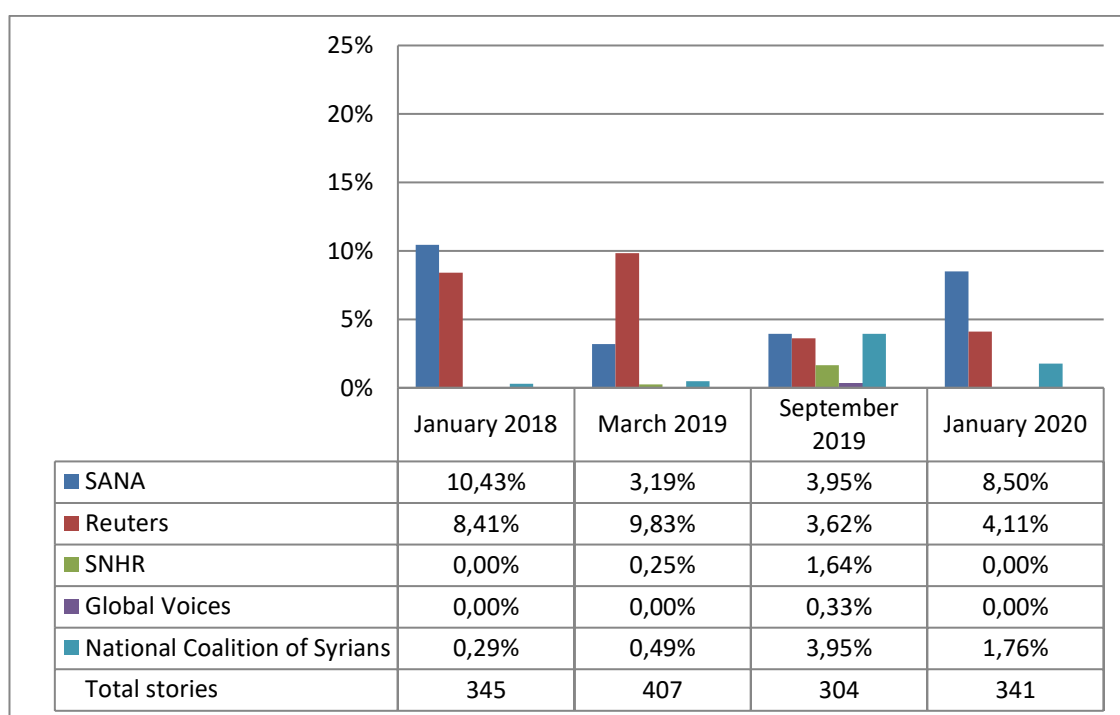
The conflict frame emerged in the news stories whose main focus was the fighting among different sides involved in the war, military strategies, moves, conquests and goals.

I was able to identify this frame in stories published by different news outlets, characterised by their own angles and perspectives and sometimes influenced by activism or propaganda. In the articles where I discerned this frame, the humanitarian and the political and power frames were sometimes present too.

The conflict frame followed a similar trend in all the four-time tranches I examined. The stories in which it was identified as the main frame oscillated between 19% and 13% of the total (table 12). In January 2018, during the offensive launched by the Syrian Army against FSA strongholds, it reached 19.13% (table 12) and the majority of the stories were published by SANA.

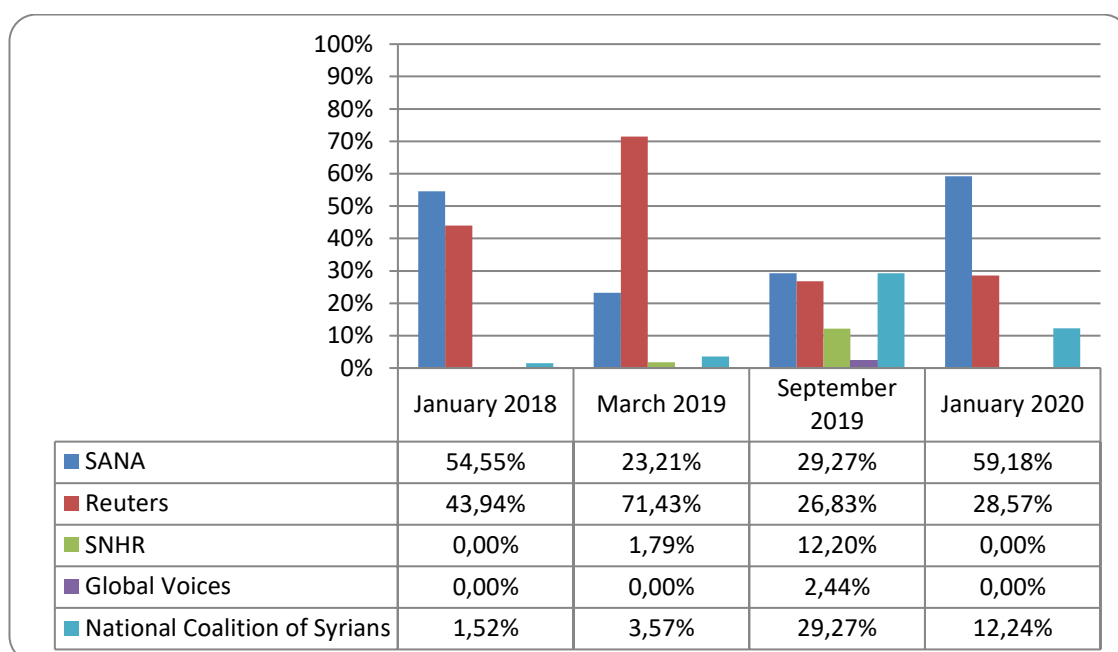
SANA and Reuters were the news agencies that published most of the stories where the frame emerged. SANA covered in depth the campaigns of the Syrian Army against what it called ‘terrorists,’ while Reuters approached the topic from different perspectives, analysing the strategies and the moves of the different countries involved in the war. On the other hand, the conflict frame did not strongly emerge from the stories published by NCS, while Global Voices and SNHR approached the topic from a different point of view.

Table 11. Conflict frames as a percentage of total stories by news outlets during time tranches³⁷



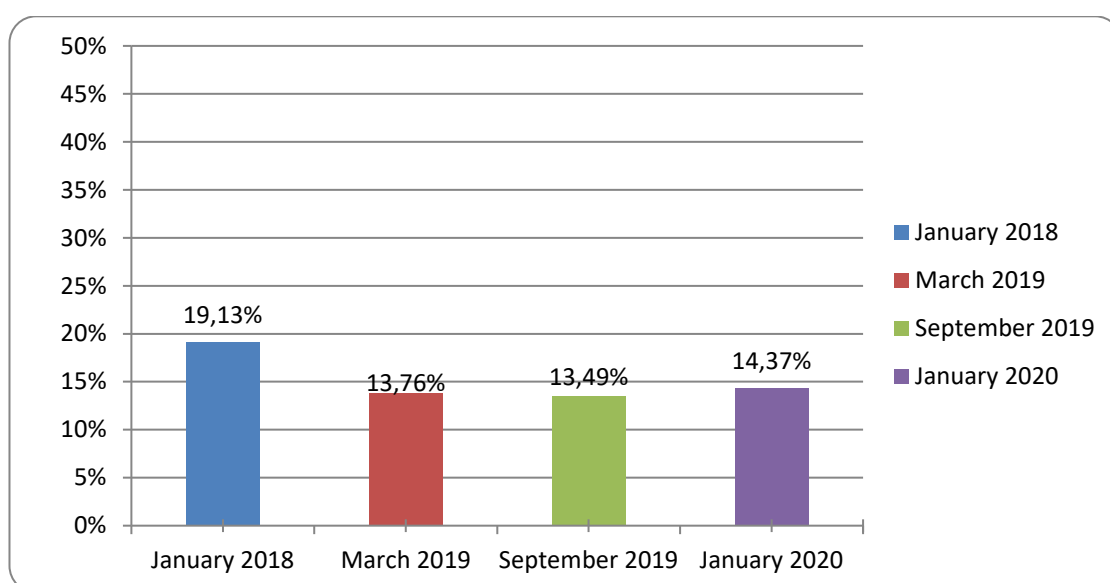
³⁷ See Appendix E

Table 12. Conflict frames emerged in relation to the news stories published by news agencies taken into consideration different time tranches³⁸



4.3b Analysis of the Conflict frame

Table 13. Percentage of conflict frame stories in each time tranche



As shown in the graph above, the conflict frame was highest in January 2018 when SANA gave in-depth coverage of the Syrian Army's offensive against Coalition strongholds, while Reuters focused on the general development of the conflict.

From March 2019, the frame started to emerge less frequently in the news stories published. Reuters and SANA remained the two news outlets which were more interested in the theme. The topic of the conflict remained in the background of most

³⁸ See Appendix E

of the stories published by the various other news outlets, but the conflict frame was not the main one. In September 2019 and January 2020, the frame started to emerge in more stories published by NCS due to the more frequent air strikes of Syria and its allies in areas controlled by the Coalition.

The conflict frame emerged particularly in stories published by SANA and Reuters, characterised by the use of élite sources among the military or politicians belonging to different sides. In the articles published by SANA, the main focus was on the strategies adopted by the Syrian Army and their achievements.

“After a three-month military operation, the Syrian Arab Army has forced the armed terrorist groups to surrender in large areas after handing over their heavy weapons. During the military operation, the army units directed concentrated and accurate strikes against terrorists’ sites, inflicting heavy losses upon their ranks and equipment while the rest of them surrendered.” (SANA, n.4)

“The Syrian Arab Army units have launched intensive strikes on the movements and gatherings of terrorist groups in response to their frequent violations of the de-escalation zone agreement.” (SANA, n.180)

The lexical choices such as *military operation*, *surrender*, *strikes*, *losses* and the context played an important role in the identification of the frame. SANA also used the word *terrorist or terrorist group* to identify the government’s enemies. It was therefore difficult to understand which armed groups were actually fighting.

The news outlets also focused on attacks carried out by Syria’s enemies, usually identified as terrorists, or a coalition led by the United States, denouncing the weapons used (i.e. white phosphorus) or highlighting that the strikes hit the de-escalation zone or safe areas.

“Local sources in Deir Ezzor told SANA reporter that warplanes of the US-led coalition fired white phosphorus bombs at al-Baghouz farms which extends on the Syrian-Iraqi borders with white phosphorous bombs as a number of people were martyred” (SANA, n.149)

“The terrorist organisations positioned in Idlib countryside renewed their attacks on the safe areas and targeted with rocket shells Mharde town and its

surrounding in northern Hama in repeated violation of the de-escalation zone agreement” (SANA, n.163)

“SANA’s reporter in Lattakia said terrorists deployed a number of drones from their positions in Idleb and sent them in the direction of Hmeimim Airport, but anti-air defences shot them down.” (SANA, n.339).

The conflict frame emerged clearly in these articles and the tone always highlighted the aggression suffered by Syria from terrorists and those who supported them. The conflict was therefore portrayed by SANA as a war to liberate Syria from terrorism. It was interesting to note the markers *martyred or martyrs*, as SANA always referred to civilian casualties using these words – thus the humanitarian frame was present too. As stated above, SANA referred to the enemies of the Syrian government as terrorists, who were conducting the main operations and attacks, financed and supported not only by the United States but also by Turkey and Israel:

“Terrorist groups affiliated with the Turkish regime stole crops in the countryside of Ras al-Ayn in Hasaka’s northern countryside, while the Turkish occupation forces sent more military vehicles and equipment to the Abu Rasen area.” (SANA, n.309)

“The Command indicated that this outrageous aggression reaffirms Israel’s support to the terrorist groups and its desperate attempts to raise their collapsed morale due to the heavy losses inflicted upon them in Harasta area in the Eastern Ghouta, and due to the sweeping victories which are being achieved by the Syrian Arab Army in Idlib.” (SANA, n.38)

Probably reflecting its role as the government official news agency, SANA tried to portray the situation as a war against terrorism, supported by foreign countries. The stories reported might be therefore influenced by propaganda and SANA’s perspective in reporting the war was solely focused on the government’s side, without taking into consideration other angles.

Reuters approached the conflict from different angles, trying to highlight the complexity of the war and the various sides involved and their respective allies.

“Forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad have stepped up the offensive in the southern province of Idlib in recent days, advancing toward the Abu al-Duhur airport, which rebels captured from the president’s troops in September 2015.” (Reuters, n.6)

“Direct military action against territory held by Kurdish militia would open a new front in Syria’s civil war and would see Ankara confronting Kurds allied to the United States at a time when Turkey’s relations with Washington are reaching breaking point.” (Reuters, n.44)

“Turkey’s air and ground operation has opened a new front in Syria’s multi-sided civil war and could threaten U.S. plans to stabilize and rebuild a large area of northeast Syria - beyond President Bashar al-Assad’s control - where Washington helped the SDF to drive out Islamic State militants.” (Reuters, n.70)

The conflict frame was identified in Reuters news stories through lexical markers, themes treated and the context of the articles. Reuters news ethos means it attempts to report conflict from different angles and perspectives in order to obtain a clearer picture, in this case, of the situation in Syria. The news outlet always tried to determine the sides involved in the stories and clearly listed their respective allies, probable strategic objectives and intentions. However, the Reuters Western perspective of the conflict might be highlighted in the word *rebels*, a specific lexical marker used by the news outlet to identify the Coalition’s fighters.

“The Syrian army, aided by Russian warplanes, attacked rebel-held towns in north-western Syria on Wednesday in the most extensive bombardment in months against the last remaining rebel bastion in the country, rebels, rescuers and residents said.” (Reuters, n.164)

“Syrian troops shelled the south of Idlib on Sunday, according to rescuers and residents in the rebel stronghold where a ceasefire had halted a fierce army offensive two weeks ago.” (Reuters, n.226)

“Heavy clashes broke out between rebels and government forces in Maarat al-Numan after the forces entered the town south of Idlib city, the troops backed by Russian air strikes had taken full control.” (Reuters, n.274)

Reuters usually referred to the Coalition as *opposition or rebels*, rarely as Free Syrian Army, the term which was used by NCS. Furthermore, the sources selected by Reuters were usually elite sources. However, in the articles where the conflict frame emerged, the contribution of civilians was essential for reporting about what happened in areas that reporters were not able to reach (as in article n.226).

The conflict frame also emerged in stories where the news outlet reported about the conflict against IS sustained by the Kurds or the attacks by Syrian Jihadist groups. This proxy war was only touched on by other news outlets.

“Jihadist insurgents launched attacks against Syrian army posts in north-western Syria on Sunday, which they said killed at least 25 soldiers and injured others to avenge civilian casualties during a recent escalation of army shelling.” (Reuters, n.120)

“Islamic State unleashed car bombs against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) assaulting Baghouz, in a last-ditch effort to stave off defeat in its final patch of territory, fighters from the U.S.-backed force said on Sunday. Capturing the besieged village in eastern Syria will be a milestone in international efforts to roll back the jihadists, whose self-styled “caliphate” covered roughly a third of Syria and Iraq at its height in 2014.” (Reuters, n.122)

The frame emerged only a little in stories published by Global Voices and SNHR as their focus was on different topics. SNHR did publish a few stories where the frame was present as the main one. I was able to identify this due to mainly lexical markers and the context.

“Syrian regime fixed- wing warplanes fired a missile near Civil Defence Centre in Sfuhun village in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate” (SNHR, n.225)

“Wing warplanes we believe were Russian fired missiles near a building sheltering IDPs in al Dahr village which is administratively a part of Darkoush city in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate.” (SNHR, n.231)

In the articles cited above, the strike was the main part of the story, the humanitarian frame was present, but the main focus was on the attack. In addition, the words *warplanes* and *missiles* were markers that helped me identify the frame. The SNHR

approach was very different from the one chosen by Reuters or SANA, as the news outlet focused just on the attack, without analysing it further.

Global Voices, touched only lightly on the topic of the military conflict, focusing on civilians and the humanitarian crisis. The conflict emerged in one story, but the angle chosen was completely different from other news agencies. Global Voices chose to focus on Russian soldiers and their use of social media.

“Social media allowed the Russian government to instantly and forcefully communicate its presence and “success” in Syria. The erosion of the American role in the Middle East was staged live, and despite new information security measures, the Russian military is willing to weaponise its soldiers’ social media posts when it is convenient to do so.” (Global Voices, n.15)

The context and the words *Russian military, weaponise, soldiers* allowed me to pin down the frame, but the political and power frame was also present.

The frame did not emerge in many stories published by NCS, maybe due to the difficult situation faced by the Coalition, almost defeated by the regime and on the verge of losing its stronghold and the support provided by its allies. Therefore, NCS mainly focused on denouncing the war crimes and the attacks of its opponents, trying to push the international community to politically intervene and stop the war.

“Russia has expanded its military operations in Damascus and its suburbs as well as in Idlib province, resulting in dozens of civilian deaths and knocking a hospital in rural Idlib out of service.” (NCS, n.11)

“The Russian air force has carried out three deadly attacks in the province of Idlib recently, the deadliest of which was the attack on the central prison west of Idlib killing more than 40 prisoners and wounding dozens more. Another wave of airstrikes also targeted central Idlib” (NCS, n.77)

The lexical markers supported me in recognising the frame, but the humanitarian frame was also strongly present.

NCS also reported about the attacks of general terrorist groups, without specifying their names. In these cases, the NCS blamed the international community and the Syrian

government. It can be postulated that this was influenced by the Coalition's guidelines and propaganda.

"The Coalition went on to say that the Syrian Army will continue to hunt down the terrorist elements and militias as it is working to increase its readiness to counter any evil plans and ensure the end of any terrorist presence threatening the security of civilians in the region. Terrorism that the regime is managing and spreading, as well the terrorism being practiced by the allied militias and organisations of various denominations are the direct result of the international failure to deal with the issue and its inability to impose a real political solution."
(NCS, n.132)

4.4 Political and power frame

4.4a Introduction

In this frame I classified stories that highlighted and explained the political strategies adopted by the different sides involved in the country, including political responses to problems or situations, specific policies followed by different parties, the actions of politicians or officials in order to face military or diplomatic challenges.

The main topic is therefore the in-depth analysis of the political situation in Syria, told through different lenses, sometimes influenced by propaganda, activism or different points of view.

The political and power frame was identified in 17.39% and 13.49% (table 15) of stories analysed in January 2018 and September 2019. In the other two-time frames it was less pronounced, as the main focus was the offensive of the Syrian Government against the FSA Strongholds (January 2020), along with the rise of the IS (March 2019).

In January 2018 the majority of the stories where I was able to identify this frame were published by Reuters and SANA. In the other time tranches under consideration, this frame emerged most strongly in NCS stories, reaching its peak in September 2019 (73.17% out of 41 stories, table 14). Each news outlet displayed a different emphasis within the overall context of the frame.

SNHR did not publish stories where this frame strongly emerged, while Global Voices adopted a completely different approach, analysing the political strategies, just in

January 2018 and March 2019, through the point of view of Syrian civilians or experts, not just providing a description of the facts, but trying to interpret them through a different lens.

Table 14. Political and power frame as a percentage of total stories by news outlets during the time tranches³⁹

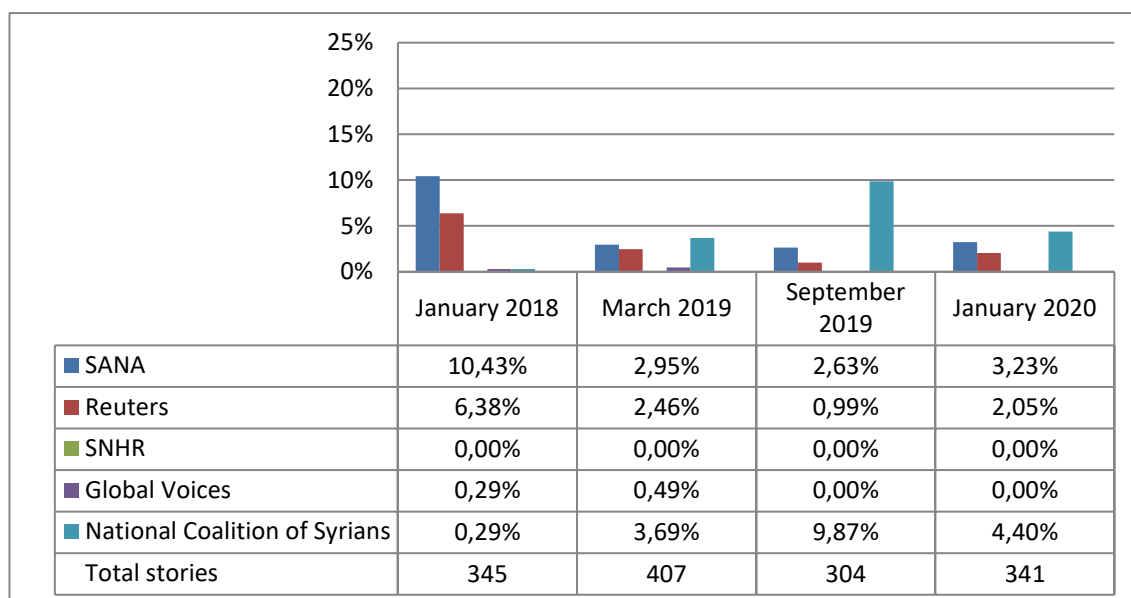
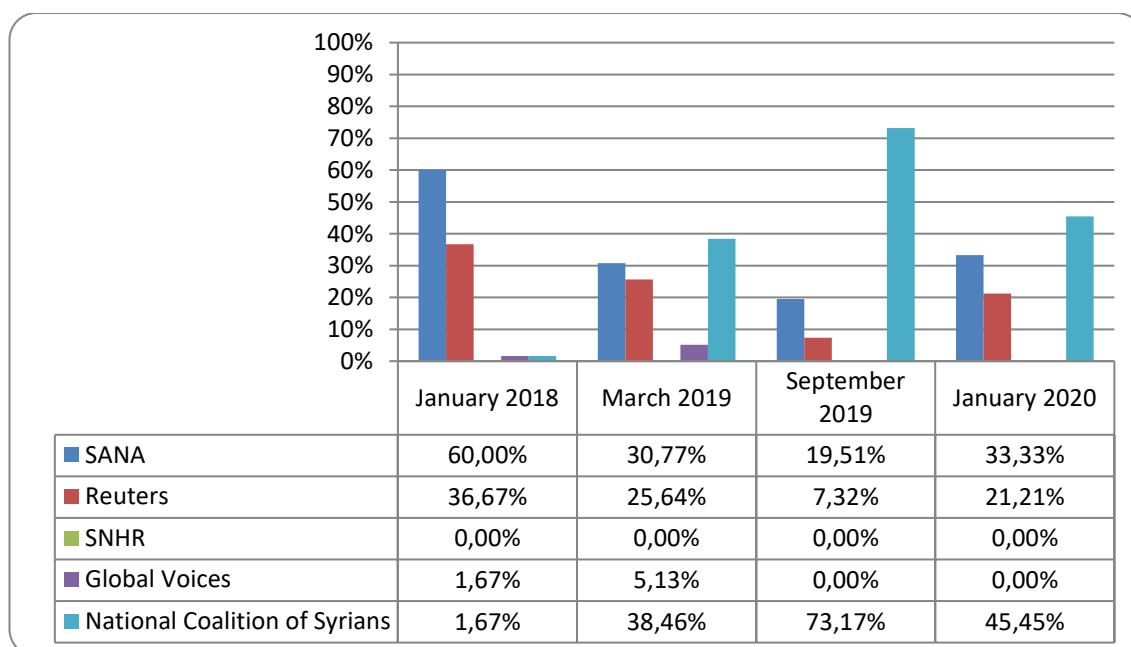


Table 15. Political and power frames emerged in relation to the news stories published by news agencies taken into consideration different time tranches⁴⁰

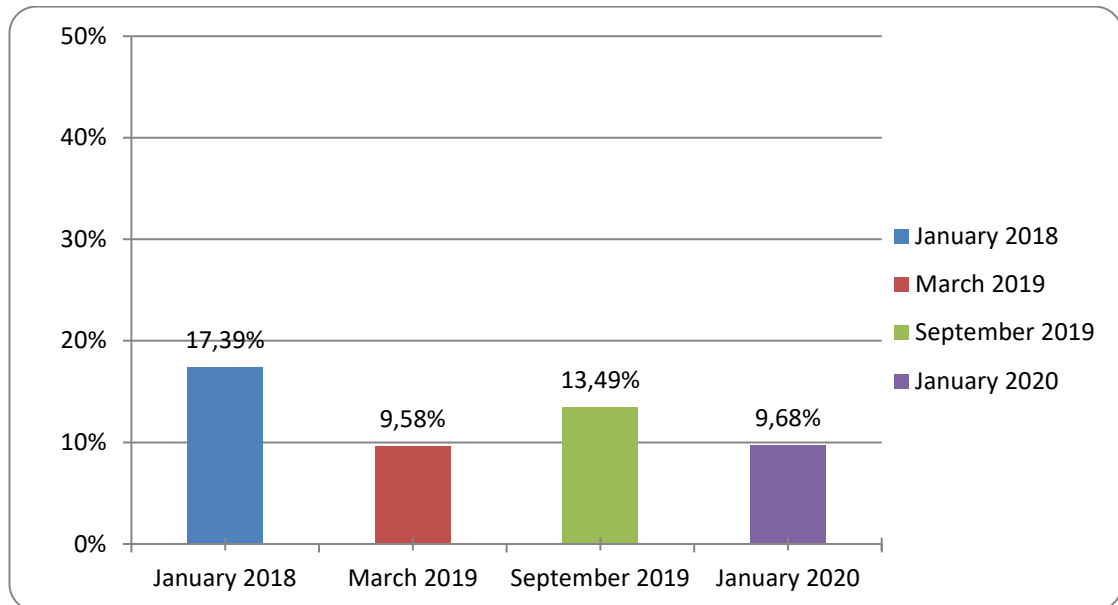


³⁹ See Appendix E

⁴⁰ See Appendix E

4.4b Analysis of the political and power frame

Table 16. Percentage of political and power frame stories in each time tranche



The political and power frame was strongly linked to the international relations frame, as both displayed similar trends throughout the four-time tranches. I realised that these frames increased whenever Syria gained stability, decreasing, when the country had to face sudden changes regarding the conflict, mainly due to the rise of a new force, such as IS, as well as military or political intervention of a foreign power.

As shown in the graph above, the political and power frame peaked in January 2018, when Syria, as already stated, was going through a time characterised by stability after years of war. In this particular time period, SANA and Reuters published many stories in which the political and power frame emerged, while NCS was more focused on humanitarian issues.

On the other hand, from March 2019, this frame started to emerge more often in NCS stories, due to the international community and the world powers' political interest and intervention in the Northern area of Syria, under the direct control of the Coalition. Therefore, NCS started to focus on promoting the innovations and reforms proposed by the revolutionary government, which directly intervened in the peace talks and conferences in order to be recognised by the international community. The Coalition also increased its influence in Syrian policy, even supporting the same cause as the Syrian government in the debate about recognition of the Golan Heights.

The political and power frames emerged most in stories published by SANA, NCS and Reuters, mainly using élite sources and focusing on the policy adopted by the different sides directly and indirectly involved in the conflict. Going through my analysis it was therefore possible to pin down their different political approach to the Syrian situation. SANA, as the official Syrian government's news outlet, published stories where the main topic was the government's will to bring Syria back under its control, creating a more solid and united country:

"Speaker of the People's Assembly Hammoudeh Sabbagh reiterated that the priority in Syria is to eliminate terrorism, enhance local reconciliations, adding that the Syrian people's solidarity with the leadership and army enabled Syria to achieving successive victories over the terrorist organisations" (SANA, n.42)

I was able to identify the lexical choices *priority*, *enhance*, *leadership*, *achieving*, which are used in many articles published by the news outlet and along with the topics treated, they were important markers to identify this frame. However, in many articles published by SANA, the rebuilding frame was also present, as this emerged as one of the main political objectives of the Syrian government.

"The Cabinet meeting's main discussion points were to continue all necessary procedures to complete the urban project of Aleppo, develop a comprehensive vision to support the factories in Aleppo, review investment status, set a comprehensive investment map tourism project in Aleppo and rehabilitate Sheraton Aleppo Hotel." (SANA, n.43)

"The Cabinet approved the agricultural support strategy devised by the Agriculture Ministry as part of the self-reliance and self-sufficiency strategy." (SANA, n.298)

In the articles n. 43 and n.298, the rebuilding frame was strongly present, but the context supported me in identifying the political and power frame as the dominant, along with the words *meeting*, *develop*, *set*, *project*, *strategy*, which are specific markers that pointed out the political strategy adopted by the government.

On the other hand, the political and power frame could be identified in the article titled 'Syria categorically rejects conclusions of OPCW fact-finding mission about using

chemical substances in Douma' (SANA, n.161), where the international relation frame was also present. In this case, the context of the article was fundamental to the identification of the frame, where the Syrian spokesman declared the government's intentions:

"The Foreign Ministry concluded by saying that Syria, while reaffirming its firm stance against using any chemical toxic materials in any place and at any time, categorically rejects the conclusions reached by the mission team." (SANA, n.161).

The feature published by SANA focused on the intention of Western powers to spread fake news in order to blame the Syrian government for war crimes:

"The Ministry said Syria stresses the need for the countries of the world, particularly those that claim to care for international peace and security, to focus on dealing with the real threat to all countries which is international terrorism and the use of toxic chemical materials by terrorists, stressing that the countries of the world should not provide cover for the terrorists' crimes in Syria to serve personal agenda. The Ministry concluded by demanding that the Security Council and UN Secretary-General denounce the terrorists' crimes against Syrian civilians, including their use of chemical weapons, in addition to demanding they support the Syrian government in its war on terrorism". (SANA, n.298)

"The spokesman added that the US, France and Britain, due to the failure of their policies in Syria that aimed to undermine its security, stability and territorial integrity, have worked to move their terrorist tools in Syria, mainly, the so-called 'White Helmets' to fabricate allegations of using chemical weapons in Syria." (SANA, n.191).

Sometimes I was not able to identify markers that could help me pin down the frame. In such cases, the tone of the article and the context were key, as they highlighted the initiatives and the reactions of the Syrian governments in relation to external accusations and interferences, which also led to sanctions that hit the Syrian economy and slowed down its upswing.

Reuters also published various stories in which the political and power frame emerged usually alongside the international relations frame. In fact, due to Reuters' wider

approach to the Syrian political situation, it was more difficult to identify the main frame, as in the articles published journalists analysed the various political views and approaches adopted by different powers involved in the conflict. Therefore, the lexical markers and the context along with the sources cited were elements that, combined together, allowed me to pin down the political and power frame.

“Russia is hosting what it has called a Syrian Congress of National Dialogue in the Black Sea resort of Sochi on Tuesday that it hopes will launch negotiations on drafting a new constitution for Syria after almost seven years of civil war. But Western powers and some Arab states believe Sochi is an attempt to create a separate peace process that would undermine U.N. efforts to broker a peace deal while laying the groundwork for a solution more suitable to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his allies, Russia and Iran.” (Reuters, n.99)

The words *attempt, broker, peace deal, solution*, were specific markers for the political and power frames. However, the context was the real key to pinning down the frame, as it highlighted the main focus of the piece, based on political strategies and policies adopted by the different sides.

In the article n. 108, the international relations frame was also present, but the political and power frame emerged in the context, as it implied that France and the Western powers might need to change their approach towards the situation in Syria.

“If it turns out that this operation takes a turn other than to fight a potential terrorist threat to the Turkish border and becomes an invasion operation, (then) this becomes a real problem for us,” (Reuters, n. 108).

In addition, Reuters also analysed the political balance among the different powers involved in the conflict, respectively allied with the Coalition or the Syrian government, therefore the political and power frame was marked by the words *contribution, establishment, discussing, possibility, get answers, accuses, undermine, siding* and was also determined by the context.

“Mrs Parly went to the United States to start talking to the Americans and try to get answers to various questions: If by chance the American military presence

would be maintained? What would be the contours of its presence? What would be the mission? What would be the capabilities? We do not have these answers yet...It is on the basis of information that we don't have yet that President (Macron) will determine the possibility of a French contribution." (Le Drian, Reuters, n.179)

"The United States accuses Sovfracht of being behind a sanctions-evasion conspiracy to make payments and facilitate the transfer of supplies of jet fuel to Russian forces operating in Syria in support of the government of President Bashar al-Assad. Russia's foreign ministry criticized the new U.S. sanctions in a statement on Friday and said that by seeking to undermine the Russian military's refuelling efforts in Syria, Washington was effectively siding with radical militants there". (Reuters, n.239)

"Turkey and Russia are discussing the establishment of a secure zone within Syria's north-western Idlib region where Syrians displaced by fighting can shelter during the winter, Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar said on Wednesday" (Reuters, n. 262).

In the stories published by Reuters, the focus of the news outlet was to analyse the political themes from different perspectives, providing insights of the different approaches adopted by the sides involved. However, the policies adopted were usually described from a Western perspective, leading to a subsequent analysis of the possible consequences that might influence the frail political balance among the world powers, as in the case of Golan Heights recognition by the USA. In this case, Reuters also focused on the reaction and comments of the members of the UN Security Council.

"The United Nations Security Council will meet later on Wednesday, at the request of Syria, over U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to recognise Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights. The European members of the council raised concerns about "broader consequences of recognizing illegal annexation and also about the broader regional consequences. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait on Tuesday criticized the U.S. decision and said the territory was occupied Arab land. Iran echoed the

comments, describing Trump's decision as unprecedented in this century" (Reuters, n.199)

While in SNHR stories I was not able to identify the political and power frame, in one article published by Global Voices (n.14) it did emerge. The theme is not directly related to conflict, but focused on the EU proposal to tackle 'terrorist content' with AI, despite implications for war crimes evidence.

"A committee in the European Commission is threatening to intervene in this scenario, with a draft regulation that would force companies to step up their removal of "terrorist content" or face steep fines. While the proposed regulation would break the cycle of companies attempting and often failing to self-regulate, it could make things even worse for groups like Orient News" (Global Voices, n.14).

The political and power frame was marked by the words *intervene, regulation, draft*, but the tone of the article was key in pinning down the main frame, even if the humanitarian, civilian and conflict frames were also present.

NCS published various stories where the political and power frame was present, especially in the stories focused on explaining revolutionary goals and plans, also describing NCS's influence on the other countries in the Middle East.

"We reaffirm that our political work is aimed at reaching a political solution that meets the legitimate demands of the Syrian people to build a democratic, pluralistic Syria that guarantees freedom and a decent life for all its citizens and one that is based on the rule of law and equal citizenship. We will continue to deal positively with all the efforts aimed at reaching that solution, particularly with the UN envoy to Syria'. Moussa also stressed the importance of adequate representation of women in the political process" (NCS, n.19)

"President of the Syrian Coalition Riad Seif stressed that success of the Iranian people in achieving their demands through the revolution against the dictatorial Mullah regime will have a positive impact on the situation in Syria and most of the countries of the region" (NCS, n.6)

The main markers I was able to identify were *political work, solution, democratic, freedom, revolution, impact*. The context and the tone of the article were also key in supporting me in the identification of the frame, along with the sources used, mainly from the Coalition government.

The frame also emerged in the stories where the Coalition pushed for political solutions and negotiations, especially asking for the mediation of the UN, but at the same time attacking the Syrian government.

“Mr. Pedersen (UN envoy) should focus on his main task, namely to reconcile the parties to the negotiations and force Assad to sit at the negotiating table in Geneva to find a solution instead of boasting about visiting the ruins of a city that was destroyed by Assad and his supporters by brutal bombardment in which they used various types of weapons, including chemical weapons” (Syrian Negotiations Commission, NCS, n.65)

In this case, the influence of activism and propaganda against the Syrian government was clear, as were the accusations against Assad. This approach might be a consequence of the political strategy followed by the Coalition, in order to push the UN and world powers to intervene.

The main thrust of NCS stories was to find a political solution, representing the Coalition as the sole representative of the Syrian people.

“Mustafa stressed that SIG’s new programme aims to establish a good governance in parallel with the political efforts of the Syrian National Coalition as the legitimate, sole representative of the Syrian people so as to support the UN-led process aimed at finding a political solution in accordance with international resolutions. “(NCS, n.99).

The words *programme, governance, political efforts, solution* were clear markers to identify the frame, along with the context of the article. Similar markers could be identified in the article n. 177, where the main theme was the role of the Syrian Tribal Council.

“The two sides discussed important issues at the field and political levels, stressing the importance of restoring stability in the liberated areas, including in east of the Euphrates through the establishment of civil administration and the provision of the essential services to the population” (NCS, n.177).

One of the few stories in which the frame emerged, but the main theme was not linked to the Revolution, was article n. 85, where the topic of the Golan Heights was tackled.

“President Trump thinks he is the only one calling the shots in this world. We say to him you will not be able to attain everything you want. Last week I called the French president and asked him about his opinion of Trump’s decision. He told me that he shared my view and that he would meet President Trump and would express his rejection of the decision,” President Erdogan said. The Syrian Coalition earlier said that the attempts by US President Donald Trump to grant legitimacy to the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights “constitutes a violation of international law and consolidation of the law of the jungle.” It warned the international community against “remaining silent about any allusions to the territorial integrity of Syria.” (NCS, n.85).

NCS approached the topic from a wider point of view, looking at the issue from a more international perspective, but highlighting the position of the Coalition on the matter, which was the same as the Syrian government.

“Syria condemned in the strongest terms irresponsible statements made by the US president on the occupied Syrian Golan, which confirms the United States blind bias to the Zionist occupation entity, stressing that these statements will never change the fact that the Golan was and will always be a Syrian Arab territory.” (SANA, n. 191).

NCS did not use the same tone as SANA in the story, but chose an approach similar to Reuters. In SANA’s story the government’s propaganda was visible in the phrase *United States blind bias to the Zionist occupation entity*. On the other hand, NCS chose a softer approach, avoiding overt activism. In any case the political and power frame strongly emerged in both SANA and NCS stories, linked to the international relation frame which was also present.

4.5 International relations frame

4.5a Introduction

The international relations frame emerged in news stories whose main focus was to highlight world powers' relations with each other, the UN, Syria and the Coalition, international conferences regarding the ongoing conflict, peace talks, ceasefires, along with Syria's and the Coalition's diplomatic relations or agreements with different countries.

The international relations frame was strongly linked to the political and power frame. In fact, these frames were usually present in the same stories, as the internal policy was usually strongly set out and it influenced the international strategy adopted by different countries.

The international relations frame emerged most prominently in stories published in January 2018 and September 2019 respectively reaching 20% and 15% (table 18) out of the total number of features analysed.

SANA focused on the government's strategies to improve Syrian relations with other countries, while Reuters focused on international conferences and peace talks. NCS highlighted the efforts of the Coalition in being recognised by the international community, looking for help and support from other countries involved in the war.

In the stories published by SNHR and Global Voices, the frame did not emerge. However, SNHR published two stories in January 2018 where it was dominant, but the humanitarian frame was also present.

Table 17. International relations frame as a percentage of total stories by news outlet during time tranches⁴¹

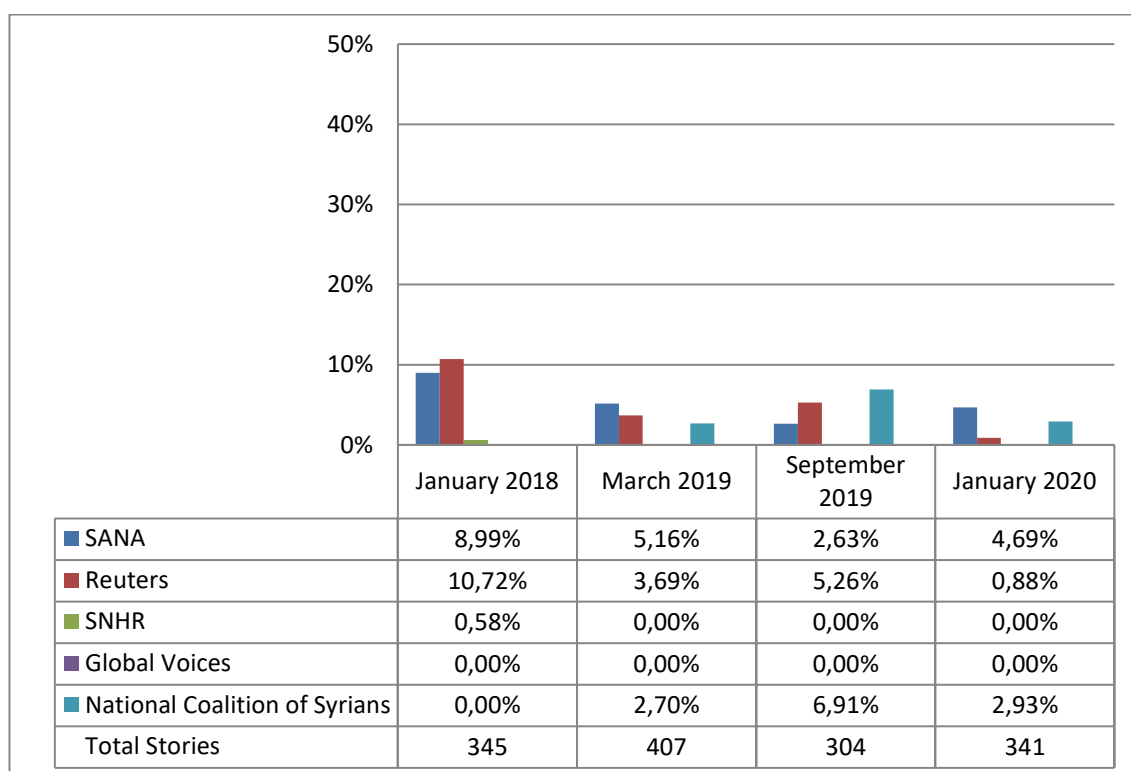
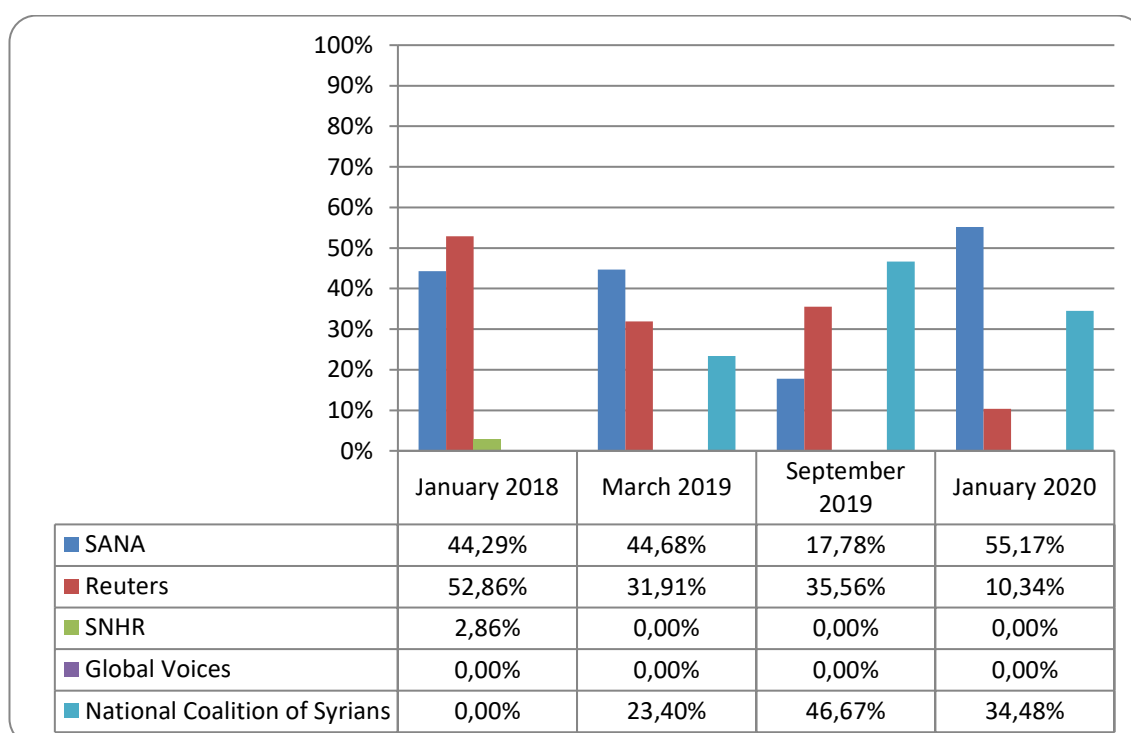


Table 18. International relations frames emerged in relation to the news stories published by news agencies taken into consideration different time tranches⁴²

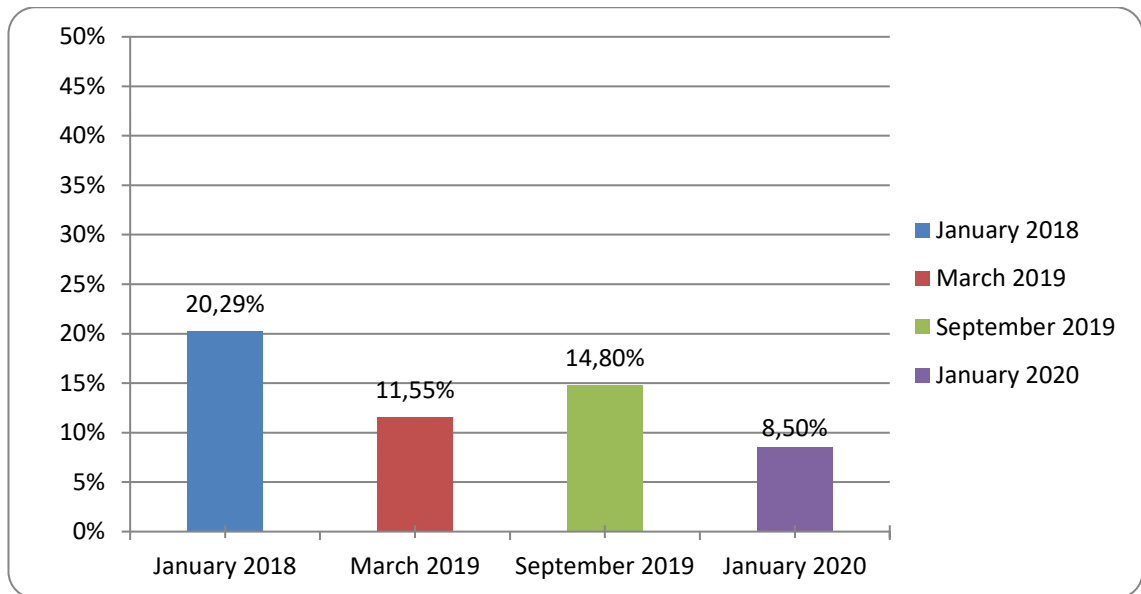


⁴¹ See Appendix E

⁴² See Appendix E

4.5b Analysis of the international relations frame

Table 19. Percentage of international relations frame stories in each time tranche



As stated above, the trend of the international relations frame was similar to the one followed by the political and power frame. The publication of stories where this frame was present increased when the situation in Syria reached a certain stability. In long-running conflicts, when there is a lull in the fighting, the five news outlets tended to turn to stories focused on different aspects related to conflict.

In January 2018, SANA and Reuters were the news outlets that published most of the stories where I was able to identify the international relations frame.

However, from March 2019, this frame started to emerge more often in NCS stories, as the Coalition became more involved in international policy and started to participate more actively in conferences and peace talks.

The international relations frame emerged particularly in stories published by SANA, NCS and Reuters. It was characterised by the use of élite sources and it focused on different aspects of diplomacy. However, SANA also relied on civilian sources, such as the chairman of a delegation of French volunteers to integrate the information gathered from élite sources.

“‘We came to Syria to salute your resilience and convey the truth to the French people. We are proud to show you the true face of France, not the face of the government’, said the chairman of the delegation Iskandar Oumid. During the visit of the delegation to Ain-Zaman’s Shrine, Shaikh Aql al-Muahideen, Yusuf

Jarboa'a pointed out that Syria's enemies tried to destroy it, exploiting misleading media to deceive the world public opinion and convey a distorted image far away from the reality of the situation." (SANA, n.8)

Context often helped me in identifying the international relations frame, as the markers were not so evident and the sources selected could have led me to identify the civilian frame as the main one.

In the stories published by SANA, the news outlet also focused on the relations among the Syrian government and countries willing to cooperate and conclude political and economic agreements, also approaching different themes such as migrants, rebuilding and commercial deals.

"The Head of the Brazilian parliamentary delegation visiting Syria, Arlindo Chinaglia, said on Saturday that the visit aims at boosting the parliamentary relations between the two friendly countries in a way that would positively reflect on the interest of the two sides." (SANA, n.20)

"Members of the delegation said that consolidating the diplomatic relations between the two countries would promote cooperation at various official and popular levels, particularly during the upcoming stage which is witnessing the start of Syria's recovery." (SANA, n.29)

"The Syrian and Lebanese armies are keen to closely monitor the illegal crossings between the two countries,' Ibrahim said, adding that in the near future we will see cooperation (with Lebanon) on more than one level, and Lebanese companies will have a role in the reconstruction phase." (SANA, n.121)

Therefore, the rebuilding frame was strongly present. But in these cases, I relied on clear markers to identify the international relations frame, such as *cooperation, delegation, discussion, promote, interests*.

In other articles, SANA approached the topic of the collaboration between Russia and Syria in fighting what it called terrorism and providing political and humanitarian aid. The news outlet focused on the friendship between the two countries.

“The two sides (Syria and Russia) stressed the bilateral friendship and partnership relations between the two countries in different spheres, particularly in the humanitarian field and in counterterrorism in Syria.” (SANA, n.228)

“Discussions tackled the political process, with the two sides (Syria and Russia) underline supporting the work of the Committee of discussing the constitution away from any foreign intervention or any politicization practiced by some sides which could hinder its work or put obstacles in front of the continuation of its work.” (SANA, n.368)

The context, as well as the sources and the markers clearly highlighted the presence of the international relations frame as the main one. In addition, the themes were also key in identifying the main frame, such as the relationship between Syria and Russia, along with their efforts to fight terrorism (intended as referring to the Coalition). It was also possible to detect the presence of other frames (political and power, humanitarian, conflict) and the influence of Syrian propaganda.

On the other hand, SANA highlighted Syria's poor relations with the USA. Topics receiving the most treatment were the US recognition of Israeli annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights and US support for what Syria perceived to be terrorist groups.

“‘The US continues its flagrant support to terrorism to which Syria is exposed, in a flagrant and continued violation of the UN charter and rules of international law as well as all relevant resolutions,’ An official spokesman at Foreign and Expatriates Ministry told SANA in a statement. (SANA, n.184)

“‘The US president has recognised the annexation of the occupied Syrian Golan to the Zionist occupation entity in a flagrant aggression of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, turning a blind eye to all international reactions that condemned such resolution’ an official source at the Foreign and Expatriates Ministry said on Monday”. (SANA, n.203)

The topic along with the tone of the article were key in identifying the international relation frame. The approach to the topic chosen by the news outlet and the unilateral

selection of sources might be a reflection of the influence the Syrian government exerted over its official news agency.

Reuters published various stories in which the international relations frame emerged, usually along with the political and power frame. Reuters main focus was on the relations among the world powers and Western countries involved in the Syrian context. The combination of markers, context and tone of the articles was therefore key to identifying the international relations frame.

“Hariri (Coalition) suggested Western powers still had enough influence to push the government to negotiate. ‘It is time for President Trump, Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister May to say: Stop,’ the former cardiologist said. ‘It is time for Trump, Merkel and May to increase pressure and bring the international community together to get a genuine and just political situation in Syria’ “. (Reuters, n.35)

The focus of this story was on the Coalition pushing for the international community to intervene. However, all the Western powers involved were mentioned, therefore along with the markers *international community, increase pressure, influence, delegation*, the context was fundamental in order to identify the frame. Reuters focused not only on the relations between the Coalition and its Western allies, but it implicitly extended the focus on all the sides involved in the conflict, analysing the different situations through the perspective of the Syrian opposition.

“Iran and Russia are trying to deprioritise the transition. We need the international community’s help to put pressure on the regime and their backers, Russia and Iran.” (Reuters, n.35).

““With every U.S. statement about the need to confront Iran’s influence, Iran has been expanding in Syria while moderate forces that are backed by Washington see aid being dried up and are weakened,’ Sejari said. ‘We asked for the resumption of aid and explained the dangers of leaving moderate FSA forces without support.’ Sejari said the delegation’s meetings had included members of the U.S. Congress and officials from the White House, and they hoped for

sessions with Defence Department and State Department officials as well.”
(Reuters, n.30)

Reuters approached the reporting of the conflict from a multilateral point of view. However, the Western perspective sometimes emerged, therefore the focus of the agency was more attracted by the relations among Western powers than by those among other countries involved in the conflict.

“German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel on Monday called his Turkish counterpart to express concerns about the possible impact on civilians of a Turkish offensive in northern Syria, as pressure mounted for him to reject arms sales sought by Ankara. Gabriel told Turkey’s Mevlut Cavusoglu he worried about the humanitarian consequences of an escalation in Syria, and both men agreed the Syrian political process should now be continued in an intensive manner, a ministry official said.” (Reuters, n.54)

Reuters was also the only news outlet which focused on relations between Israel and the other countries involved in the Syrian conflict, reporting about the meetings between Israel and Russia, as well as the repercussions of the US decision to recognise Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. The international relations frame emerged strongly in the articles published, confirming Reuters intentions about covering the conflict in all its aspects.

“‘I will discuss with President Putin Iran’s relentless efforts to establish a military presence in Syria, which we strongly oppose and are also taking action against,’ said Netanyahu, without elaborating, before boarding a plane for the visit, scheduled to last several hours.” (Reuters, n.97)

“Tunisia will coordinate with fellow Arab countries to contain any fallout from the U.S. decision to recognise Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, Foreign Minister Khemaies Jhinaoui said on Friday. He was speaking to a meeting of Arab ministers ahead of the annual Arab League summit, hosted this year by Tunisia and likely to focus on Washington’s decision and its earlier move to recognise Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. ‘We will work with fellow Arab countries and the international community to contain the expected repercussions of this decision

in the various regional and international forums,' Jhinaoui told the meeting in Tunis." (Reuters, n.202).

The markers *meeting, coordinate, discuss*, supported me in identifying the main frame along with the sources selected and the context of the story.

SNHR published just two stories where I was able to identify the frame, however the humanitarian frame was strongly present too. The marker international *coalition* was key to identifying the frame, highlighting the controversial relations between Syria and the other countries involved, even if the theme was strictly humanitarian.

"International Coalition forces committed a massacre in Hajin city in Deir Ez-Zour suburbs on January 13" (SNHR, n.9)

In Global Voices stories the international relations frame did not emerge.

On the other hand, in the stories published by NCS, the frame was easier to recognise, as most of the articles focused on conferences, meetings, commissions and this was a key factor in the identification of the frame, along with lexical markers.

"A delegation of the Syrian opposition's Negotiations Committee, headed by Nasr Al-Hariri, met with Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit and Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shukri in Cairo on Tuesday as part of the international tour the delegation has embarked on." (NCS, n.8)

"A delegation from the Syrian Coalition on Tuesday begun a visit to the Belgian capital Brussels where it will hold several meetings with senior officials and diplomats from the United States, the European Union and a number of other countries. The Syrian Coalition still believes in the major role of the international community in meeting the demands of the Syrian people, namely to get rid of tyranny and violence and to find a sustainable political solution in Syria in accordance with the international resolutions, most importantly the Geneva Communique of 2012 and the UN Security Council resolution 2254" (NCS, n. 43)

"President Mustafa added: 'The Coalition looks forward to increased political and diplomatic action by the United States to restore balance to the political

process aimed at building a secure, stable state that is free of the Assad regime and the Iranian militias.’ “(NCS, n.49)

The markers and the sources selected played a central role in pinning down the frame, as well as the themes treated and the context of the articles. The international relations frame emerging in these stories was strongly linked to the efforts of the Coalition to promote the ideas of the Revolution and gain support by the International Community.

The Coalition focused on improving its relations with the allies, such as the USA, pushing for their diplomatic intervention to stop the conflict and officially recognise the Coalition, which also meant acknowledging its ideas.

“Coordinator of the Department, Abdulahad Astepho, stressed the importance of the meeting, describing it as fruitful and successful. He emphasized the importance of the strong relations between the two sides and the need for continuous communication and coordination in order to serve mutual interests. “The better the relations between our allies, the more we will be able to overcome obstacles and achieve the common goals that we share with friendly and sisterly states,’ Astepho said. The two sides also discussed the continued bombing campaign by the Assad regime and its allies in Idlib. They stressed the need to put an end to the atrocities and war crimes taking place against civilians as they underscored the importance of protecting civilians and establishing an immediate ceasefire.” (NCS, n.150)

“The meeting, which took place inside the US Congress in Washington DC, was organised by the Syrian community in the United States. Member of the Commission Badr Jamous, said that they asked members of the US Congress to urge the US administration to take serious action to protect civilians in Syria and ensure a nationwide ceasefire, the release of detainees, and the provision of humanitarian aid for the IDPs.” (NCS, n.194)

The markers *meeting, strong relations, allies, ensure, take action, mutual interest* supported me in identifying the frame. In addition, the context and themes of the article were also key in my analysis. The political and power frame was also present but the

main focus of the story was on the relations between the Coalition and the USA. However, when the USA recognised the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, the Coalition agreed with the Arab Leagues and Syrian government position. In fact, NCS and SANA approached the topic in a similar way, nevertheless NCS used a more moderate tone and also reported about the reaction of the Arab League.

“President Mustafa stressed that the US position ‘will not contribute to security, peace and stability in the region as he warned that chaos will continue. Reneging on this position is very necessary as it violates international law.’ “(NCS, n.74)

“The Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. Ibrahim al-Assaf rejected US recognition of Israel’s ownership of the Golan Heights. Al-Assaf warned that the announcement ‘will have dire consequences for peace in the Middle East.’ He said that the Golan Heights is an occupied Arab Syrian land as per the relevant international resolutions as he stressed that President Trump’s announcement constituted a clear violation of the United Nations Charter.” (NCS, n.87)

I was able to pin down the frame thanks to lexical markers, the tone and the context of the features. NCS chose to report about the story from a wider angle, also using sources that did not belong to the Coalition. However, NCS also decided to agree with the position taken by the Arab League and therefore in this case the Syrian government.

4.6 Humanitarian frame

4.6a Introduction

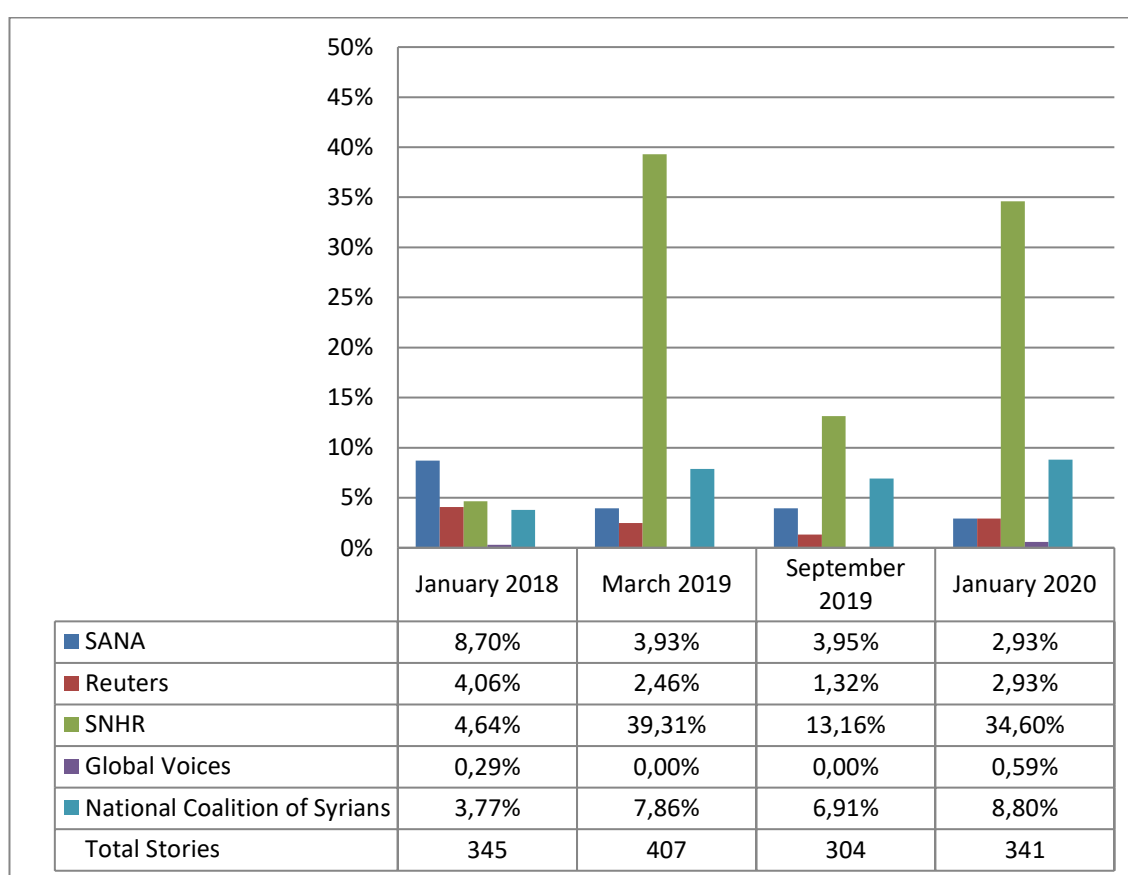
The humanitarian frame emerged in news stories where the main focus was the humanitarian aspect of the war, including civilian casualties, destruction of cities and buildings, assistance to people trapped in besieged cities or warzones plus civilian escapes or forced evacuations from dangerous situations.

This frame was the one that emerged in most of the stories published by the news outlets and it was characterised by their own angles and perspectives. The humanitarian topic was visible not only in stories describing the crisis in Syria, but also in those denouncing war crimes committed by different sides and those pushing the international community and the UN to intervene.

The humanitarian frame was most prevalent in March 2019 and January 2020 (respectively 53.56% and 49.85% of the stories published, table 21), as during these time periods the situation became more stable, but at the same time, the fall of IS in March 2019 sparked major interest in the humanitarian topic.

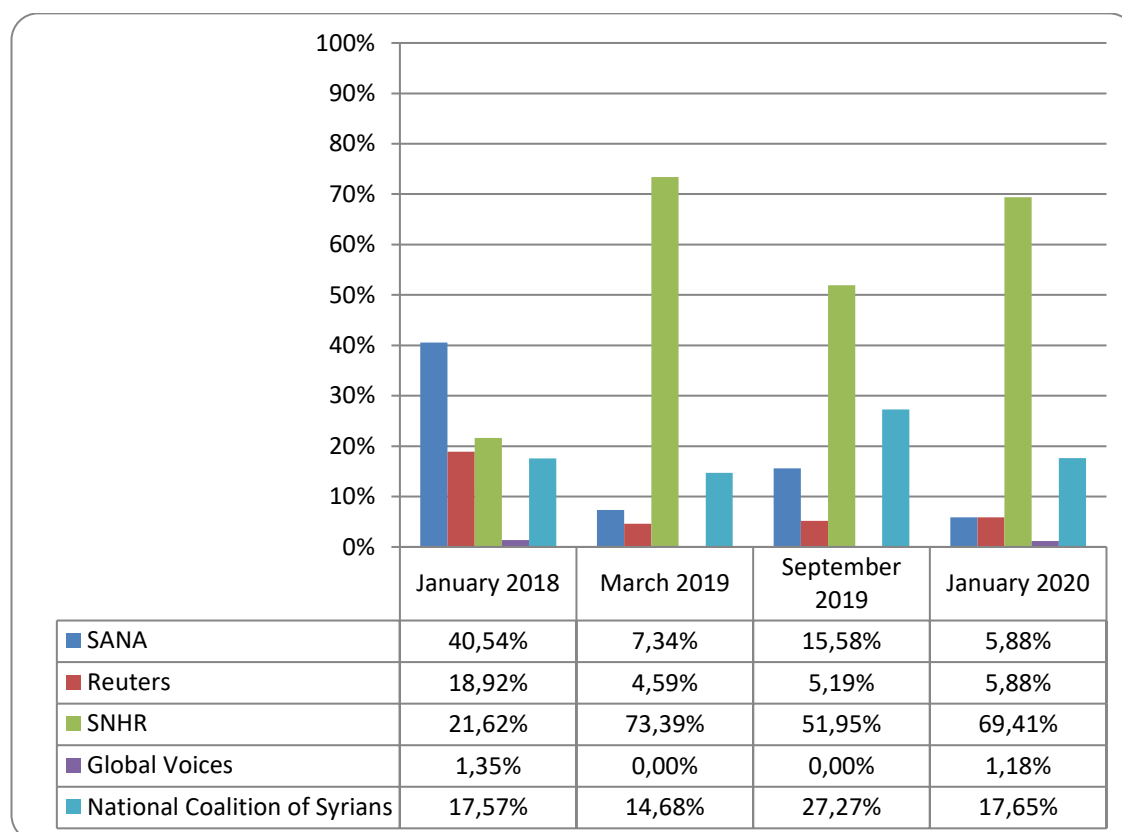
Reuters mainly focused on the general humanitarian situation, covering the crisis. SNHR was the main news outlet that almost completely based its stories on the humanitarian frame and it was therefore used as a reliable source by other news outlets. Global Voices approached the humanitarian topic from its point of view, using the perspective of civilians experiencing the conflict. On the other hand, NCS and SANA had a similar approach to the humanitarian topic.

Table 20. Humanitarian frame as a percentage of total stories by news outlet during time tranches⁴³



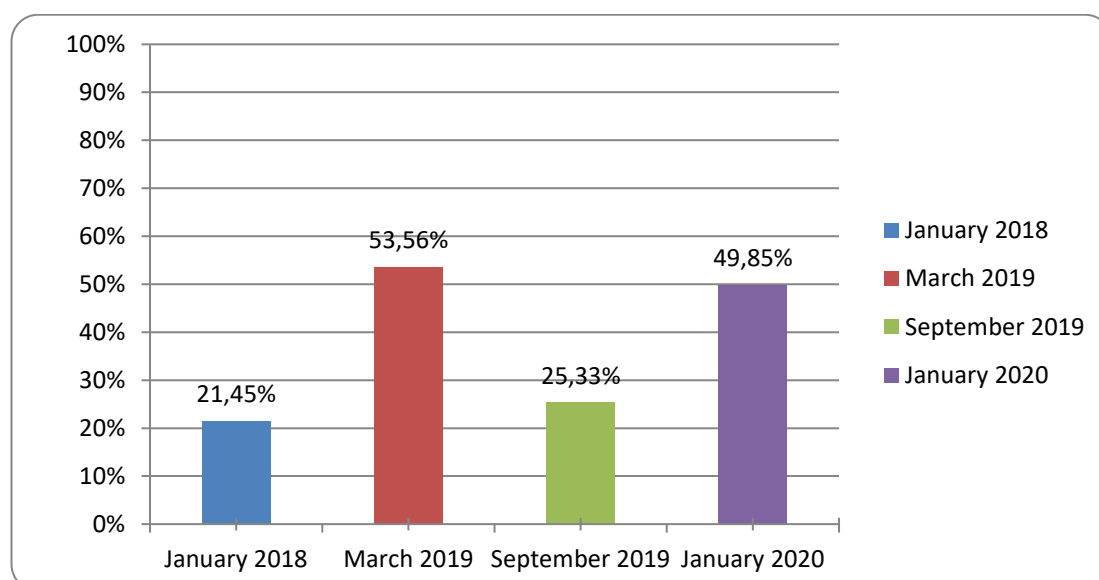
⁴³ See Appendix E

Table 21. Humanitarian frames emerged in relation to the news stories published by news agencies taken into consideration different time tranches⁴⁴



4.6b Analysis of the humanitarian frame

Table 22. Percentage of humanitarian frame stories in each time tranche



⁴⁴ See Appendix E

As shown in the graph above, the frame peaked in March 2019 and January 2020. The situation in Syria was more stable but the humanitarian crisis was at its peak, with refugees living in camps, human corridors for aid were not safe and many civilians were still in danger, even after the fall of IS, living in besieged cities or near the warzones, where they could not get support or help.

The humanitarian frame emerged in stories published by SANA highlighting aid provided by UN organisations or the Syrian government to the people in need or living in the warzones. The news agency relied mainly on élite sources, but the lexical markers were clear, so they supported me in identifying the frame.

“The governorate of Hama has received on Wednesday two ambulances presented by the World Health Organization (WHO). Earlier, Governor of Hama Mohammad al-Hazzouri discussed with the WHO’s Resident Representative Elizabeth Hoff means to enhance cooperation between the two sides and the existing projects to improve the health, living and social services for citizens, especially those affected by the crisis.” (SANA, n.10)

“A humanitarian aid including food baskets, provided by Russian government, was distributed by Daraa governorate to 400 of the displaced and martyrs’ families in Karfa town in Daraa countryside in addition to providing medical assistance to the needy and sick people.” (SANA,n.65)

“Under the supervision of the Syrian Arab Army, the authorities set up three humanitarian corridors to receive civilians wishing to leave areas under the control of terrorists in Idleb and Aleppo countryside. The authorities and army units operating in the area made all necessary preparations to receive civilians wishing to leave terrorist-infested areas, with buses, ambulances, and food supplies being prepared.” (SANA, n.322)

The words *humanitarian corridor*, *ambulances*, *supplies*, *food*, *health*, *social services for citizens*, were key in identifying the main frame. In addition, the use of lexical choices such as *enhancing cooperation and helping civilians leave terrorist-infested areas* might be related to the influence exerted by the government on the news outlet. It identified enemies as terrorists and wrote about trying to build relations with the UN, showing the will of the government to cooperate.

On the other hand, I also identified the humanitarian frame in stories where SANA highlighted the casualties suffered by civilians and denounced crimes against civilians committed by what they called terrorist organisations or government enemies.

“Three children were injured when a landmine left by Jabhat al-Nusra terrorists went off in the southwest of the village of Jaba in Quneitra countryside on Saturday.” (SANA, n.63)

“Thousands of civilians have fled their houses and villages in Afrin city and the surrounding areas in the northern countryside of Aleppo as the Turkish troops continue their attacks and random bombardment of the city.” (SANA, n.110)

“Pushed by hatred and supported by US occupation forces, QSD militias had handcuffed and beat the old man on his head with their weapons, leaving him bleeding to death. They also beat his wife, leaving her with serious injuries in the head.” (SANA, n.269)

The humanitarian frame could be identified thanks to the context and the lexical markers; however I was able to note that in article n.110 SANA used civilian sources. In addition, in the stories where the frame emerged, SANA usually stressed that the responsibility for the crisis rested with terrorist groups and their allies, who also supported and pushed these groups to commit crimes against the people. Therefore, in some stories, it was possible to pin down the political and power frame as well as the international relations frame.

“Driven by dirty political goals and colonial ambitions, the US continues to hamper the exit of thousands of displaced Syrians from al-Rukban Camp in al-Tanf area on the Syrian-Jordanian borders and block them from returning to their hometowns which have been liberated from terrorism by the Syrian Arab Army.” (SANA, n.143)

Reuters, as already stated, approached the topic from a multilateral point of view, using élite and civilian sources and mainly focusing on the Syrian people’s struggles, living conditions, as well as on aid provided by the UN and the approach of Western countries to the humanitarian crisis.

“United Nations agencies began on Monday delivering aid for the first time in six months to some 60,000 Syrian refugees stranded in a desolate area near where Syria’s border meets the Jordanian and Iraqi frontiers, aid agencies and Jordanian officials said.” (Reuters, n.11)

“Syrian government forces and their allies have killed at least 85 civilians since Dec. 31 in stepped-up attacks against the besieged rebel enclave of Eastern Ghouta, the U.N. human rights chief said on Wednesday. Conditions in the enclave, the last major rebel-held zone near Damascus and where at least 390,000 civilians have been besieged for four years, amount to a humanitarian catastrophe, Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein said.” (Reuters, n.20)

“Around 350,000 Syrians, mostly women and children, have fled a renewed Russian-backed offensive in the opposition-held Idlib province since early December, and have sought shelter in border areas near Turkey, the United Nations said on Thursday.” (Reuters, n.264)

Many of the stories where the frame emerged focused on the UN intervention and declaration to support the Syrian civilians and provide humanitarian aid. I relied on lexical markers and sources selected among UN officials to identify the humanitarian frame, also paying attention to the context of the story. However, Reuters also approached the humanitarian theme from a more personal perspective, relying on civilian sources and analysing the situation from their perspective.

“Diab moved first east and then north searching for safety, finally taking shelter near Turkey where he hopes his wife and four children will be safe from air strikes and ground assaults. ‘Every time I get to a new place I build a house, but we are forced to leave it and move on’ he said at a makeshift camp a few miles from the border, where hundreds of people endure the mud and winter weather.” (Reuters, n.41)

“‘I had two brothers and a sister. They all died, and then I was by myself,’ Hareth told Reuters, tears filling his eyes. ‘My little sister, I loved her a lot. I used to take her with me to the market.’ Lying in a cattle truck beside another injured boy at a desert transit point for U.S.-backed forces, he huddled under a blanket. His face

was covered in dirt and the side of his head wrapped with bandages covering wounds incurred days earlier.” (Reuters, n.115)

In these particular cases, the sources and the context were key in identifying the humanitarian frame, as the lexical markers were not so evident.

Furthermore, as already stated, Reuters also focused on the bigger picture, not only covering the humanitarian crisis in Syria, but also its repercussions in the Western world, as well as humanitarian violations going on in countries involved in the war, such as Turkey.

“Turkey has detained more than 300 people for social media posts criticizing its military offensive in Syria, the government said on Monday, a day after President Tayyip Erdogan accused doctors who opposed the campaign of betrayal.” (Reuters, n.96)

“Surveys by the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR saying that while 83 percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon wanted to go home eventually, only 5 percent of them planned to do so in the next year. ‘Arrest, torture and killings continue to this very day. Detention by the Syrian security agencies is so arbitrary that no refugee can ultimately be sure of a safe return,’ wrote French envoy Bruno Foucher and German envoy Georg Birgelen.” (Reuters, n.170)

Lexical markers and context supported me in identifying the humanitarian frame. However, these sample stories also showed Reuters interest in analysing not only the situation in Syria, but also the strategies and policies adopted by Western countries involved in the conflict.

SNHR was the news outlet that approached the humanitarian topic in most of the stories published, attempting to deliver a fact-based description of events. They mostly relied on their reporters on the ground and reported about war crimes, strikes and attacks against civilians committed by all sides involved in the conflict.

“Zakariya Ahmad al Dablan, arrested on September 29, 2011 by Syrian regime forces in al Tahtouh neighbourhood east of Deir Ez-Zour city. On January 11, 2018, we received information confirming his death due to torture in a detention centre” (SNHR, n.7)

“Hussein Yamen al Daher, a lawyer, was killed in a shelling by Syrian regime forces missile launcher on Saraqeb city in Idlib governorate northeastern suburbs, on March 9, 2019.” (SNHR, n.77)

“Syrian Democratic forces raided al Khababesa neighbourhood in al Sh-heil city in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate, on January 2, 2020, arrested eight civilians from the same family and took them to an undisclosed location.” (SNHR, n.299)

“Near Aleppo- Damascus International Road near Saraqeb city in the eastern suburbs of Idlib governorate, IDPs’ convoys were attacked by strikes carried out by Syrian regime fixed- wing warplanes, on January 28, 2020.” (SNHR, 430)

I was able to pin down the humanitarian frame thanks to the context and lexical markers. In the case of story n.430, the photograph published by SNHR supported me in this task, showing a displaced person holding his child in an agricultural landscape. The frame was always present in SNHR stories and usually it was the main one, as the focus of the agency was to denounce the war crimes, casualties and suffering of the population without being influenced by political factors. In fact, as stated on their ‘about’ page:

“The Syrian Network for Human Rights aims to enrich the human rights culture in Syria, spread awareness among citizens regarding their civil and political rights, and train dozens of Syrians in various fields of human rights. SNHR wishes that Syrian citizens would enjoy their full legal and constitutional rights. The Syrian Network for Human Rights is a non-political organization that affirms its commitment towards international standards, declarations, and conventions of human rights of the United Nations”.

Global Voices approached the topic from a perspective of individuals caught up in the conflict, mostly relying on civilian sources that were living in the warzones. Therefore,

they seemed to empathise with the victims and, at the same time, they focused on reporting about the humanitarian crisis.

“Her own rape took place at the notorious 215 security branch in Kafr Sousa, Damascus. She says: ‘Three monsters entered the room. The first started to unzip my jacket. He set off to forcefully remove my clothes. I was in denial as to what was happening. I was screaming...in so much pain...I felt my soul leaving my body. My whole world came tumbling down. I was stark naked when I woke up...the sheets were stained. I could not remember what happened...’” (Global Voices, n. 6)

“About a month ago the shelling started to intensify, so I went underground with my family to the shelter in Harasta. The shelter is an open basement space, not divided into rooms. It holds 50 families, including around 170 women and children, all scared and hungry.” (Global Voices, n. 7)

Global Voices mostly used civilians and local reporters based on the ground to gather information and report about the facts, therefore, it might be possible to recognise in the stories published the influence of activism, or self-identification in the situations described. The humanitarian frame was strongly present and I was able to recognise it through lexical markers, along with the context and the tone of the story.

NCS covered the humanitarian topic not by focusing on the crisis and the suffering of the people, but by approaching it from a more political point of view. Even if the humanitarian frame emerged in the stories, the political and power frame was always present, as this reflected the partial nature of NCS’s reporting and its closeness to the Coalition. The NCS might be influenced by the Coalition’s guidelines in reporting about this theme.

“The Assad regime besieges many towns and villages in Syria, the largest of which is the Damascus suburb of eastern Ghouta where about 400,000 civilians are currently trapped inside. Thousands of civilians have died of hunger, cold and disease since the siege was laid on the area in 2012.” (NCS, n.14)

“The administration of the Rukban refugee camp on the Syrian-Jordanian border appealed to the UN Secretary-General, the UN Human Rights Council, and the friends of the Syrian people to assume their humanitarian duties towards civilians trapped in the desert camp. The camp has been under tightened blockade by the Assad regime and Russian forces.” (NCS, n.23)

“Thousands of children due to start the school year in north-western Syria may not have access to education due to the latest escalation in violence and the Assad regime’s and Russian bombing campaign which has been ongoing for over four months, the aid group Save the Children said.” (NCS, n.100)

“Russian airstrikes targeted civilian areas in more than 1,083 occasions, destroying 201 schools, 190 healthcare centres, and 56 popular markets. Moreover, the Russian and regime attacks displaced 3.3 million people from their homes in the reporting period.” (NCS, 181)

NCS’s approach was similar to the one adopted by SANA, stressing the responsibility of its enemies for the attacks and strikes that hit civilians, therefore reporting the situation from a single point of view. The lexical markers *targeted civilians*, *displace*, *escalation in violence*, *children*, *trapped*, *refugees* were key in identifying the main frame of the stories taken into consideration.

“The World Health Organisation said it is ‘gravely concerned’ about attacks on seven healthcare facilities in north-western Syria that took place as part of the ferocious onslaught the Assad regime and Russian forces have launched in the region since late April.” (NCS, n.96)

As SANA, NCS also reported about WHO declarations and aid to the Syrian population. However, while SANA reported the story to highlight the cooperation between the Syrian government and the UN organisation, NCS used WHO as a source to highlight what it described as war crimes committed by the Syrian Army and the Russians against civilians.

4.7 Civilian frame

4.7a Introduction

The civilian frame emerged in the news stories whose main focus is civilians' daily life in warzones, problems and suffering they face, living conditions, as well as their ideas about the conflict along with their reactions to political situations in the form of protests, demonstrations or other actions. This frame did not emerge strongly in the stories published by the news outlets studied although civilian sources were the most used by the news agencies, as shown in the sourcing analysis chapter.

The civilian frame became more prevalent in September 2019 and January 2020 (respectively 22.04% and 14.37% of the stories published, tablev24). During these two periods, civilians had to face a new wave of the conflict after a period of stability (especially in September 2019) and as the situation in numerous camps and cities worsened. Furthermore, after the defeat of IS many people who lived under their violent regime were able to speak about the situation they experienced.

SANA focused on demonstrations against the US decision to recognise Israeli occupation over the Syrian Golan Heights and refugees returning to liberated areas. Reuters did not approach the topic in depth although I was able to pin down the frame in some stories, especially about the life of civilians in cities controlled by IS. SNHR was the main news outlet that approached this topic, usually through a humanitarian perspective, indirectly describing the life of people and refugees in cities and camps throughout the conflict and condemning war crimes committed against them by all sides. Global Voices published different stories about civilians, describing their conditions through their testimonies, without reporting about their political opinions or views. On the other hand, NCS did not publish many stories where the frame emerged although the number increased slightly in March 2019. The approach was similar to the one adopted by SANA.

Table 23. Civilian frame as a percentage of total stories by news outlets during time tranches⁴⁵

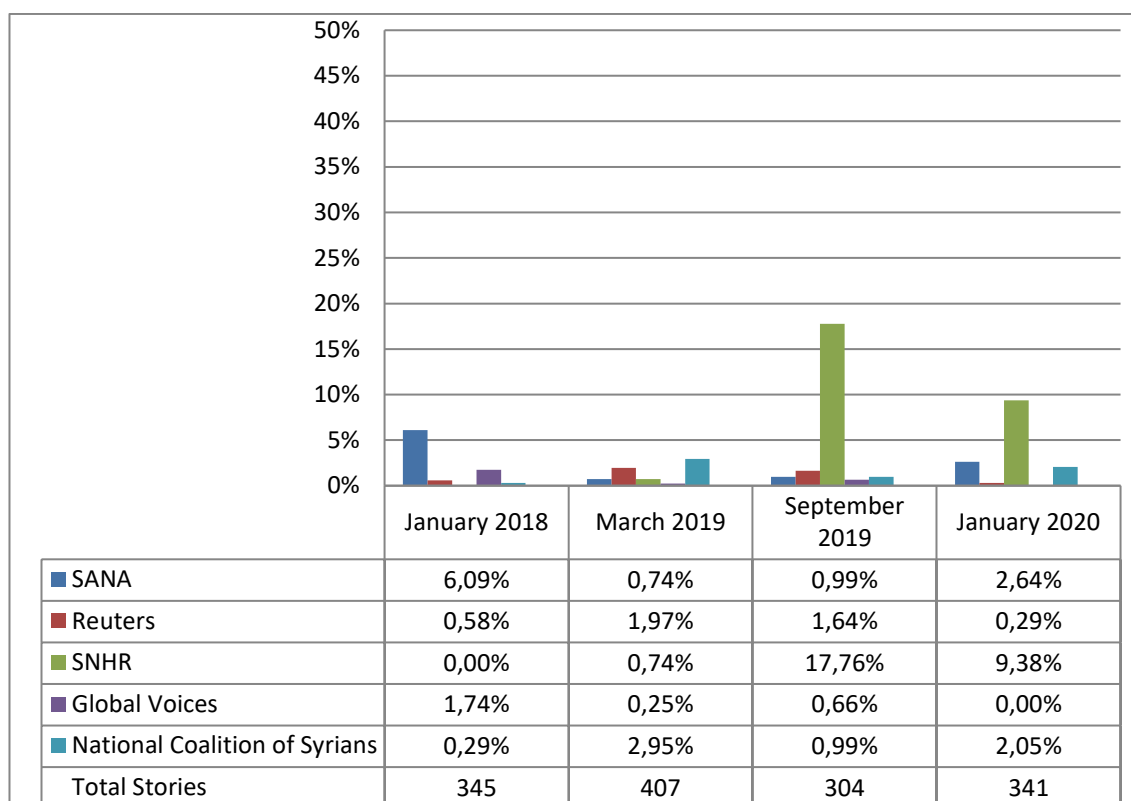
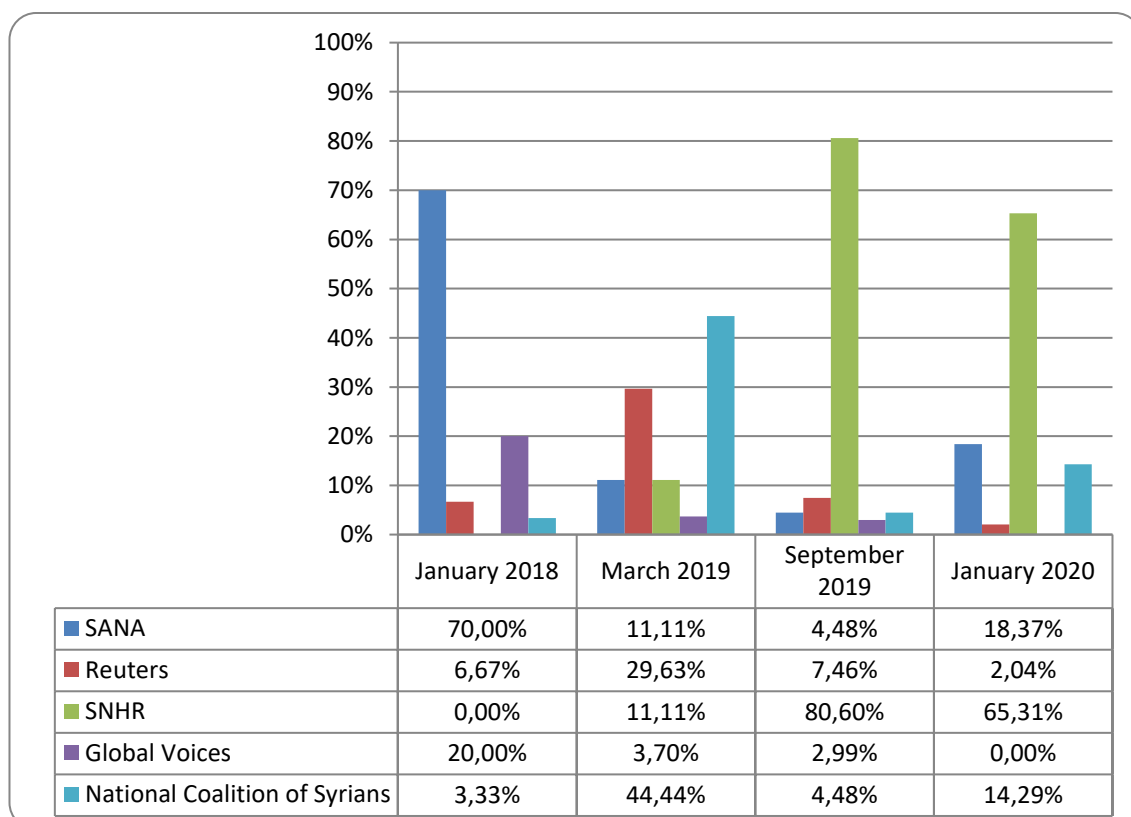


Table 24. Civilian frames emerged in relation to the news stories published by news agencies taken into consideration different time tranches⁴⁶

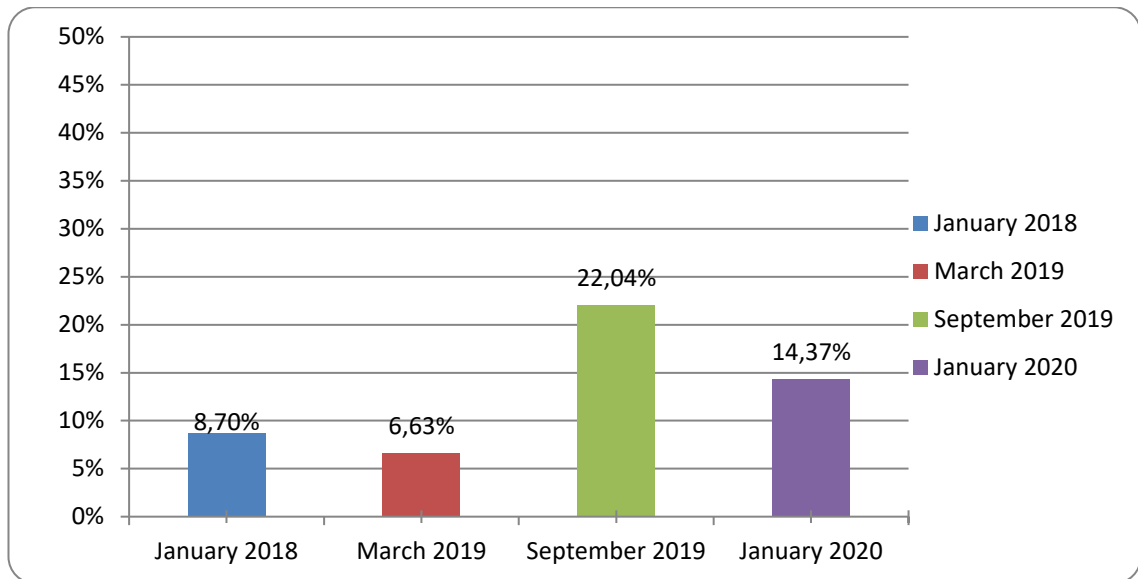


⁴⁵ See Appendix E

⁴⁶ See Appendix E

4.7b Analysis of the civilian frame

Table 25. Percentage of civilian frame stories in each time tranche



The civilian frame emerged mostly in stories published by SNHR or Global Voices (especially in January 2018). NCS, SANA and Reuters did not publish many stories where I was able to identify the frame. However, all the news outlets relied strongly on civilian sources. Therefore, I could not use civilian sources as markers to pin down the frame.

All the news outlets approached the topic, but SNHR and Global Voices focused in most depth on the civilian theme, reporting on peoples' experiences and suffering during the war. Reuters, SANA and NCS also published stories where the frame emerged, however the political and power frame and the international relations frame were also present.

The civilian frame emerged in stories published by SANA focusing on the reintegration of people in warzones, highlighting a return to normality and stability. The coverage of SANA might be influenced by the government's propaganda, willing to show the efforts of the Syrian government to provide civilian infrastructure and basic services after years of war.

“The return of the employees to Deir Ezzor reflects their desire to contribute to the rebuilding process and recover the role of the institutions in the province to be ready to provide services to citizens,’ one of the returned employees said.”
(SANA, n.33)

“1387 teachers from different Syrian provinces will participate in the tests of the 1st stage of the fourth Syrian Science Olympiad for Teachers which kicked off on Saturday.” (SANA, n.125)

“The festival, which will last until October 4, includes valuable offers, gifts and drawing lots to visitors throughout the festival. A number of citizens expressed their satisfaction and admiration of the festival, which revives the commercial movement, supports economy and provides various goods that meet the Syrian family needs.” (SANA, n.288)

The civilian frame was the main frame emerging, identified by lexical markers *employees, services, teachers, festival, Olympiad, citizens, family* and the context. The rebuilding frame and the political and power frame were present too, as the activities were supported or organised by the government, illustrating its will to restore normal life in the liberated zones.

SANA also published stories where the main themes were celebrations for military victories over Syrian enemies or protests against international political actions or decisions against Syria.

“Participants in the stand affirmed that people in Hasaka province stand by the steadfast Syrian people in the occupied Syrian Golan who are adhered to their land and who stand in the face of the barbaric practices of the Zionist enemy.” (SANA, n.201)

“The citizens, during a protest stand at Sa’ad Allah al-Jaberi square in Aleppo, raised slogans that condemn the aggression and the US, Turkish presence on the Syrian territory.” (SANA, n.258)

“The citizens, during a protest stand at Sa’ad Allah al-Jaberi square in Aleppo, raised slogans that condemn the aggression and the US, Turkish presence on the Syrian territory.” (SANA, n.373)

In the stories published by SANA where the frame emerged, the perspective of the news outlet might be influenced by the Syrian government’s propaganda, in order to show

that not only the institutions, but also the Syrian population support the government's policy and condemn the intervention of foreign countries.

Reuters did not really employ the civilian theme, as the news outlet covered more the humanitarian aspects. Reuters initially focused on civilians' testimonies of their life in war zones. However, after the rise and defeat of IS, the news agency switched its focus to crimes committed against the population.

“‘My child died hungry. We wanted to feed him. He was crying from hunger when we left the house,’ said the mother, Heba Amouri. Emir is the second child she has lost since the war began six years ago.” (Reuters, n. 16)

“When Syria's war broke out in 2011, some Bosnians joined Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. But the three Bosnian women say the daughters and a sister whose return they seek -- plus their nine children -- have played no role in militancy. ‘Our only goal is to bring our children back home and finish this agony as soon as possible,’ said Senija Muhamed from the north-western town of Cazin. Their daughters and sister, stuck with their children in a camp in northern Syria since November 2017, are desperate to return, saying they were forced to go to Syria by radicalized husbands and were ready to face charges at court if needed.” (Reuters, n.136)

“Salwa Sayed al-Omar spent years as a Yazidi prisoner of Islamic State [...] ‘They took women, abused them and killed them,’ said Omar, describing how jihadists bought and sold their Yazidi captives or passed them around as sexual slaves. ‘A woman was shifted from one man to another unless it was to one who had a bit of mercy... if she was in good condition, she would carry on. If not, she would get married to avoid being abused,’ she said.” (Reuters, n.144)

I was able to identify the civilian frame due to the context and the themes approached, as the sources described their own experiences in warzones or in areas under IS control. The humanitarian frame was also strongly present. In addition, Reuters was the only one of the news outlets that reported about children brought to Syria from Europe, by men and women who wanted to join IS.

I was also able to identify the civilian frame in a story published by Reuters which focused on children's education in Syrian schools in which they attended Russian language courses. The frame emerged strongly and was marked by the words *students, school, education, courses*. However, the international relations frame was also present, as Russia was Syria's main ally in the conflict.

"Many young people in Syria, where Moscow intervened in 2015 to help President Bashir al-Assad win back territory, are eager to study Russian in order to travel to Russia or work in Russian companies they expect to appear in Syria in the future. 'At first we didn't understand anything and when we first heard the words we started to laugh...it was hard,' said Tawil. 'The teachers are helping us to love this language.'" (Reuters, n.257)

As already stated, SNHR was mainly focused on reporting the humanitarian crisis, but the civilian frame also emerged in many stories published by the news outlet. The humanitarian frame was strongly linked to the civilian frame and sometimes it was difficult to identify the main one emerging from the story. The civilian frame often emerged as the main frame in articles about refugee camps, where SNHR described the conditions people had to face.

Two tents, in al Mohammadiya IDPs Camp near Jandaris town which is administratively a part of Afrin city in Aleppo governorate northern suburbs, were burned in a fire broke out in a tent due to improper use of heating (SNHR, n.41)

Huge damages in several camps of IDPs from Hama governorate eastern suburbs (Ukhwat Saeda Camp, al Jwaid Camp, al Ghurabaa Camp, al Jnaina Camp) which are located in Atma IDPs Camps Complex at Syrian- Turkish border in Idlib governorate northern suburbs (SNHR, n.184)

The girl Yasmin Abdou al Sayyed, aged 3, died on January 28, 2020, due to an unidentified fire that broke out in al Nour IDPs Camp located in Sejjo area in the northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate. The fire also resulted in the burning of more than ten tents of IDPs. (SNHR, n.447)

IDPs from the areas of Jabal al Zaweya and Saraqeb in the southern and eastern suburbs of Idlib governorate while they were passing Sarmada- Bab al Hawa International Road to safer areas in far north Syria (SNHR, n.434).

The humanitarian frame was always present, as in most SNHR stories. These short articles accompanied with images were key in describing civilians' lives in refugee camps.

Global Voices published various stories in which I was able to pin down the frame. They strongly relied on civilian sources, describing their lived experience in warzones. The humanitarian theme was also present, however the main focus was on the daily life of civilians, as in article n.4, where Global Voices described the struggle of doctors working in a cancer centre located in a besieged city.

“Dr. Wisam Muhammed, 35, a cancer specialist and the manager of Rahmah Centre for Curing Cancer, the only centre specialized in tumours' treatment in Eastern Ghouta, told Global Voices that their patients deserve treatment as Syrian citizens but because they were born in Ghouta, the siege prevents them from receiving adequate care.” (Global Voices, n.4)

The context and the lexical markers *cancer specialist, patients, citizens, care* were key to identifying the civilian frame as the main one. On the other hand, Global Voices also focused on different civilian perspectives about the conflict. One example was of an artist providing a different angle about the situation and linking the conflict with completely different themes.

“While the portrait of Syria has been painted in the media mostly with images of war and destruction, Syrian artist Rashwan Abdelbaki has sought opportunities to challenge stereotypes and perceptions that ignore or disregard a country that “has provided much to enrich human civilization” and ‘represents a wonderful mosaic of more than 18 religions.’” (Global Voices, n. 12)

NCS, on the other hand, touched only lightly on the civilian theme and in the stories where I pinned it down the political and power and humanitarian frames were also present. NCS usually relied on élite sources and in the stories where the civilian frame

was present as the main one, it seemed that activism influenced the coverage in order to condemn or denounce the Syrian government.

“A female survivor from the prisons of the Assad regime recounted the horrors taking place in these prisons at a meeting between the Syrian National Coalition and envoys and diplomats from the major actors and influential countries in Syria, including the United States and the European Union. The ex-detainee, who introduced herself as Mrs. Mona, talked about the horrors taking place against detainees in the prisons of the Assad regime. She said that female detainees are being subjected to horrific methods of torture and maltreatment.” (NCS, n.253)

The topics were always approached through the lens of the Coalition, without leaving any space for the civilian lens. This might be due to the guidelines and agenda provided by the Coalition to its official news outlet. The civilian frame, as in stories published by SANA, also emerged in articles about demonstrations or protests, usually against the Syrian government policies or actions.

“Local activists said that hundreds of protestors gathered outside the governorate building before marching towards the Seir Square in central Swaida to protest against government corruption and the deteriorating economic and living conditions, especially following the record decline of the value of the Syrian pound against the US dollar.” (NCS, n.216)

“Social media activists on Wednesday called for protests in the province of Suwayda against the deteriorating living conditions and the economic downturn resulting from the sharp decline in the value of the Syrian pound against the US dollar.” (NCS, n.209)

The markers, *protestors*, *activists*, *living conditions*, *protests* as well as the context supported me in identifying the civilian frame. However, the angle chosen by NCS might be strongly linked to the Coalition’s agenda of portraying corruption of the Syrian Government and promoting the ideas of the revolution. The civilian perspective was therefore did not come into play. NCS published fewer stories than SANA where the civilian frame was identified, although their approach to the topic was similar to the one chosen by the Syrian government official news agency.

4.8 Conclusion

The news framing analysis showed that SANA and Reuters, even from different perspectives, mainly focused on reporting the conflict from a military, strategic and political point of view. The main frames emerging from their stories were the political and power and the international relations frames. On the other hand, SANA, was the only news agency that covered many stories where the rebuilding frame strongly emerged. This might be due to the fact that the agency was strongly influenced by the Syrian government as its main sources were government officials. Their focus was also to depict an image of Syria where the rebuilding process was finally taking place, allowing people to return home safely and rebuilding the trust of Syrians in the government after years of war. However, civilian sources also played a key role, as they were used by SANA to describe the rebuilding process and praise the efforts of the Syrian government.

SNHR and Global Voices mainly focused on the humanitarian crisis along with stories about the life of civilians in the war zone and refugees - therefore the humanitarian and civilian frame were dominant in their stories. However, while Global Voices focused more on civilians' daily life and published long reportages and features about these topics, SNHR published a vast number of short stories, more similar to 'tweets', which focused on detailing casualties and denouncing war crimes where I mainly identified the humanitarian frame.

NCS published stories about the revolution, the challenges and the changes that the Coalition had to face during the conflict as well as the relations that the revolutionaries had to build with the international community. The most common frames I was able to identify in their stories were the international relations and political and power frames, as, probably influenced by Coalition's propaganda, NCS focused on promoting and explaining the revolution and Coalition's ideas. In fact, the Coalition was trying to build a network of support, seeking help from other countries. In addition, NCS also approached the humanitarian topic, publishing some stories in which the humanitarian frame was dominant, although the political and power frame as well as the international relations frame were also present. This might be due to the fact that, as the Coalition was losing the war, it was trying to push the international community and the UN to

intervene to protect the civilians and help them maintain their political and strategic conquests.

The journalistic approach of the different news agencies was another factor to take into consideration in the news framing analysis. Every news agency reported the stories according to its own standards and guidelines, selecting their sources following their own criteria and using different journalistic tones in its articles. These factors played a key role in being able to identify and categorise the different frames and could be used as specific markers.

SANA and the National Coalition of Syrians published stories in which it was possible to highlight the influence of propaganda. This could be found in the journalistic tone of the news stories as well as in the choice of the different sources, mainly officials, military or, in some cases, civilians and refugees who always spoke in favour of the Syrian Government or the Coalition. On the other hand, Reuters tried a more objective and multilateral approach, selecting a variety of sources in the field and relying on the work of local journalists and stringers based in Syria, but also in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey or Lebanon. However, they mainly used élite sources and rarely relied on the direct contribution of civilians living next to the frontline. SNHR relied on the information and the great amount of data provided by civilian sources and verified by local reporters on the ground, following its particular approach, reporting facts as they were, in order to denounce the humanitarian crimes against civilians and the life conditions of Syrian refugees and population. Global Voices, on the other hand, relied on the reportage provided by citizen journalists, freelance and local reporters, focusing on the civilians' daily lives in the warzone, as well as the humanitarian tragedy. This was viewed not through data but through the eyes of those who directly witnessed it, telling their own stories.

Going through the news framing analysis and integrating it with the results of the sourcing analysis, it became clear that SANA relied strongly on the work of their own local reporters who were able to move easily across the country and access the warzone, collecting information from the Syrian Army and civilians to integrate the statements gathered from the élite sources. NCS had the same approach, however focused more on élite and civilian sources and rarely approached the military topic. However, elements of propaganda and activism could be easily identified in the stories published by the two

news agencies, mainly approaching political (especially NCS), military and rebuilding (especially SANA) themes. This might be due to the agendas provided respectively by the Coalition and the Syrian government, or even by the activism of the local reporters and stringers working for the Syrian news outlets. As they were directly involved in the conflict that was raging in their country, many of them could have chosen to support one side or another, implicitly reflecting their choice in the stories covered.

Reuters focused on political and military themes, but approached the topics from different angles, trying to cover and gather information from all sides involved in the conflict. As a Western news agency, Reuters followed its standards and guidelines, trying to report objectively about the conflict, analysing its impact not only in Syria, but also in the international community and the world. Reuters mainly relied on élite sources, easily verifiable, and information gathered from the reporters based in different countries including Syria. However, due to the lack of access to some warzones, the news outlet had to rely on the material and content provided by sources that were present in those areas, especially civilians or local reporters.

SNHR and Global Voices, on the other hand, mainly approached humanitarian and civilian topics, relying on civilian sources and on the contribution of local reporters and citizen journalists. They chose to report the conflict from a different angle than the other news outlets taken into consideration in this study.

SNHR relied on the work of its local reporters based on the ground, focusing on the humanitarian aspect of the war and gathering information from civilian sources. SNHR attempted to report impartially the war crimes, casualties among the population and life conditions of civilians and refugees, becoming one of the most reliable sources for the UN in this matter. Their coverage could be categorised under advocacy, for their efforts to provide the Syrian population with the support needed, by informing the world about the situation.

Global Voices mainly focused on the civilian topic. The news outlet mainly relied on the contribution of citizen journalists, supported by Global Voices' editors, to share their stories. The news outlet adopted a different approach to the conflict and reported the situation from a more personal point of view, relying on civilians' direct testimonies and covering their daily life in warzones.

When I started the news framing analysis, I was expecting the humanitarian frame to play a central role, but not that this frame would emerge as the most frequent in all the time tranches studied. The conflict frame, which I expected to be the main frame that would emerge in the analysis, was usually present, but not as the main frame in a story. In addition, I was not expecting the civilian frame to emerge this much in the analysis, even if the civilians were those who were directly affected by the conflict, reaching its peak in September 2019. It was particularly interesting to analyse the stories published by NCS and SANA where the civilian frame emerged. In this particular case, the civilian sources and the themes approached were used as propaganda for the Syrian government or the Coalition, with the sources cited praising one faction and denouncing the crimes of the other one. The use of civilian sources was a marker to identify the civilian frame, but civilians were also cited in many articles in which the humanitarian frame emerged. The extensive use of civilian sources played different roles, highlighting the influence of activism and propaganda, but also the use of civilians' perspectives to integrate the view of élite sources, as well as their own testimony about the situation in the warzones and the humanitarian crisis.

The identification and categorisations of the different frames emerging from the stories allowed me to analyse the subtle shades which characterised every frame. The journalistic approach, the tone used in the story, the sources selected, even the guidelines and the agenda of the different news agencies were factors that it was important to take into consideration, as they made every frame unique and different if compared to another one, providing a multi-perspective and multilateral view of the results extracted.

The news framing analysis and sourcing analysis also provided support in informing the interviews I conducted, along with the subsequent thematic analysis. The analysis highlighted the changes occurring in reporting conflicts, especially those that fragmented into different proxy wars like Syria, as well as providing a clearer picture of the role played by stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters in these scenarios.

Chapter 5 - Interviews

5.1 Introduction

“In 2011 when the uprising began, I took part in the protests, but without journalistic intentions. After the first protest, I spent that evening trying to send the video to the BBC. When I was arrested, on 25th March 2011, I was subject to what I call mild torture, if compared to a lot of the stuff that other people have been through, for three days. Then, after I left prison, I decided that I wanted to play a role as a journalist.” (Rami Jarrah)

In this chapter my aim was to unpack the themes that emerged from the interviews I conducted in order to answer the research questions and so that the voices of the different interviewees and participants to my research project could be clearly heard.

Before starting with the interviews, I had already prepared a set of themes that I wanted to address and investigate, mainly informed by literature review and the data gathered in sourcing and framing analysis. Through the interviews I conducted, I was able to reflect on how interviewees engaged with the questions I asked to differing degrees. I was therefore able to investigate more in depth about pre-set themes I wanted to address, but I also had the possibility to analyse themes that emerged during the interviews, regarding gatekeeping, training, networking and various aspects of the journalistic work on the field that I did not take into consideration at the beginning of my study. Furthermore, one of the main challenges was to explain concepts such as journalistic identity, which some of the interviewees, especially the Syrian media actors, were not familiar with. In addition, my main concern was about being able to link the data gathered during the interviews, mainly based on practical work on the ground, with the theoretical concepts I was investigating in my study.

Table 26. List of primary themes explored in the interviews

THEME	DEFINITION
Motivations to report about the conflict	The reason why the interviewees decided to report about the conflict and what were his/her purpose and motivations
Preparation	How did the interviewees prepare themselves to report about the conflict? Specific courses attended, education, experience in journalism
Identity	How do the interviewees identify themselves in relation to the journalistic world? Journalist, contributor, fixer... and how its perception meets the traditional standard set by the field
Sources and stories selection	How do the interviewees interact with their sources on the ground and select newsworthy stories
Editorial guidelines and protocol	How do the interviewees follow and work according to editorial guidelines, protocols and standards, especially working with Arab or Western news outlets
Work with stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters	How do the interviewees work and collaborate with these media actors, keeping in touch and using their contributions in their own news packages
Objectivity	Interviewee's idea about the concept of objectivity
Use of language	The use of language, specific lexical choices when reporting about the conflict and the influences that these choices might exert on the audience

The different angles and data gathered from the interview greatly enriched my study. The Interviewees answered the questions providing their own personal and unique perspectives, built on their own journalistic principles, ideas and direct experience on the field. I was able to analyse the same topics from different angles, through the contributions of the participants.

One of the first questions I asked my interviewees was why they became involved in the media world and in the story of the Syrian civil war. Of course, the answers varied, often depending on whether they were reporting information from within Syria or whether they were working for established news organisations outside the country. But it quickly became obvious that one of the key themes emerging from my interviews was motivation. What drives a Syrian citizen to try to send video to the BBC or other foreign news outlets? Why is a Western journalist interested in another civil war in the Middle East? This chapter analyses the interviews I conducted and the themes that emerged. In

what follows, they are grouped under six headings motivation, preparation, verification, editorial standards, objectivity and identity.

5.2 Motivation

5.2a Journalism as an ‘act of resistance’

When the Syrian revolution started in 2011 three of the Syrian interviewees were already working in the media sector. Rami Jarrah had tried to work as a journalist in Syria, but he wasn’t really successful as “the media climate wasn’t very free”, therefore he worked for import-export companies until the start of the revolution. On the other hand, Mansour Al Omari and Lina Chawaf were already working as journalists for local media outlets, however they refused to follow the government’s media agenda or accept censorship.

“I was working in a private radio station and it was only licensed for entertainment radio. So, we were not allowed to broadcast or produce news. Suddenly with the beginning of the revolution, the regime and the media ministry asked us to do political programmes and share news. I said, we could not do it. They said that we had to do it and we had to share the news they selected for us. I could not accept to do this because everything they wanted us to say was a lie. They started to put a lot of pressure on me to force me to do what they wanted and when I refused threatened me with death and my children. Therefore, I had to leave the country, but I kept reporting about the situation in Syria.” (Lina Chawaf)

“I was a journalist. I worked for both Western and Arab news outlets. So, I decided to go on with my work covering the revolution and documenting human rights violations. It was very dangerous to report the facts, because the Syrian government was targeting journalists. In fact, I was arrested in 2012”. (Mansour Al Omari).

Before leaving the country, Lina Chawaf did some limited reporting about the demonstrations, mainly on Facebook, as she was being monitored by the Syrian government and she could not expose herself. Mansour Al Omari collected a list of Syrian activists that disappeared, probably arrested by the Syrian government and kept

investigating this issue. Rami Jarrah, after his detention, started to collaborate with journalists as a fixer and stringer.

“I was reporting on things that were going on around me and it wasn’t really because I wanted to bolster my work as a journalist. Actually, it was more activism and taking advantage of what I knew or what I had learnt in terms of journalism. So mainly throughout 2011 whilst I was in Damascus, I was in touch with a lot of journalists, fixing, helping journalists find out information. I would meet them during the protests and accompany them. I would gather news of everything that happened that day and disseminate it to different news outlets. I would take pictures, videos, upload stuff on YouTube” (Rami Jarrah).

Mahmoud Mosa and Sarah Kassim were not working in the media when the revolution started. Mosa was a school headmaster, he had never worked for media outlets or with journalists. However, he initially embraced the principles of the revolution. His involvement gradually grew, leading him to leave his country and to start working as a fixer and reporting about the conflict.

“After what we saw during the demonstrations in Latakia, Homs and other cities, we were not able to remain silent. The start of the Arab Spring motivated us to bring our contribution to freedom. I had nothing in mind when it started. Then the situation escalated, we had to leave everything behind, people died and the war started. The initial idea was to contribute to the revolution, then we found ourselves in a warzone” (Mahmoud Mosa)

Kassim was only eleven years old when the conflict started. What she saw and experienced herself motivated her to work as a local reporter for a Syrian news agency.

“I witnessed the most tragic stories and I was displaced from my own home, in Hama. I was under siege for years and I was under air attacks. I witnessed this situation every day, I saw the blood and I saw everything that was going on in my country. I decided to move to the UK. I studied English Literature and then I graduated there. When I came back to Syria, I started to do my work here at the agency SY. It is very important for me to speak about the stories that I witnessed. It’s our duty for our country.” (Sarah Kassim)

As I had expected, most of the Syrian interviewees were directly involved in the protests. They directly supported the revolution, or they refused to follow the Syrian government's guidelines and agenda to report about the situation, choosing to keep working according to their own standards and ethics. Therefore, their initial approach to the coverage of the revolution and the subsequent conflict was influenced by their ideological positions. Syrian interviewees refused to compromise on what could be regarded as Western concepts of journalism – and by doing that they were strongly opposed to becoming means and outlets for pro-Assad propaganda.

The interview data point to the fact that their decision to cover the conflict was driven more by feelings of injustice and outrage at human rights violations than pure loyalty to journalism's standards.

This could quickly tip into a form of activism, as stated by Jarrah who called himself an 'activist' at the beginning of the revolution. So, the Syrian interviewees approached the initial coverage of the conflict mainly adopting forms of journalism that could be identified as journalism of attachment and advocacy journalism⁴⁷. They immediately identified a perpetrator and a victim and chose which side of the argument they wanted to support. In addition, they tried to stay close to the truth, however showing their commitment and emotions. The motivation to engage in news gathering for the Syrian interviewees was intrinsically linked to their support for the revolution. They covered the revolution and the conflict to tell the facts, but also as an act of resistance against the Assad regime, who wanted to silence them.

5.2b Journalism as a 'good story'

On the other hand, some of the foreign reporters and editors I interviewed decided to report about the Syrian conflict and situation mainly because they had previously worked on the coverage of the Arab Spring.

"When the Arab Spring started, I went to investigate the Jasmine Revolution and then I went to Libya. Consequently, I was extremely interested in understanding the Middle East and the North Africa areas and covering all these insurrections

⁴⁷ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, pp. 37-38

that were subverting dictatorships that had been in power for years. I remember that I had gone to Beirut and I entered Syria legally, thanks to a Lebanese journalist close to the regime, who was organizing these video tours for Italian journalists.” (Cristiano Tinazzi)

“I have covered the Middle East for about 16 years, I have worked for various international news outlets including the Wall Street Journal and Bloomberg. I reported from Egypt during the revolution. I was based in Kuwait, but I was deployed there several times as correspondent for Bloomberg from Cairo during protests and elections. As editor, I worked on different stories about the Arab Spring, including stories about the Syrian protests and conflict, as it was my area of competence.” (Dhalia Kholaf)

Francesca Borri and Tracey Shelton were based in the Middle East when the conflict started, respectively in Palestine and Iraq. Therefore, they took this as an opportunity to cover the Syrian war.

“My initial goal was not to report about a war, but to tell the story of a revolution. I have lived in the Middle East since 2007, working for one of the major Palestinian Groups in Ramallah, as a human rights specialist. When the Arab Spring started, I wanted to be there and report about that, as I felt it was an important movement. So I started to work as a freelance journalist and it was the time to report about Syria, as Libya, Tunisia and Egypt had already been covered. I entered Syrian passing through Lebanon in March 2012” (Francesca Borri)

Shelton worked for many years as an editor in Cambodia, but she really wanted to work in the field again. So, she moved to Iraq first and then she went to Libya when the protests started there. When the interest was lost in Libya, she was trying to work out where to go next: she thought about Syria. She had been to Syria before as a tourist, and she really wanted to go back and see how people were coping there. ‘It was early in 2012 and at that point, Syria was still just kind of kicking off. There had been protests but the armed conflict was only just beginning’. Shelton just went there as a trip to begin with and she ended up spending five years mostly covering Syria.

Ugo Lucio Borga went to Syria to cover a particular story and ended up reporting about the conflict, mainly from the point of view of the Free Syrian Army.

“When I and the journalist Nancy Porsia decided to report on the conflict in Syria, our idea was to follow and tell the story of what was described, at the time, as the Arab foreign legion. Mainly, non-Syrian groups that were starting to flow into Syria to fight against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, together with the Free Syrian Army. We entered Syria illegally, with fake identities provided by a member of a Libyan katiba⁴⁸. We actually were not able to meet the katiba. Consequently, what we did in Syria was to talk about the war from the point of view of the Free Syrian Army.” (Ugo Lucio Borga).

As stated by the interviewees, the Syrian revolution and the subsequent conflict was interesting to cover as it was a consequence and a continuation of the Arab Spring, spreading in the Middle East. They mostly had a more traditional approach to the coverage of the conflict. However, all of them had access to only one of the main parties involved in the war, the Coalition. They could therefore report about the war from a singular perspective, trying to maintain objectivity standards, as they actually had access to only one side. The majority of them had to move around with armed groups, almost as embedded journalists⁴⁹.

5.3 Preparing to cover the conflict

Some of the interviewees were well trained and prepared to report about conflicts or crises as they covered them before. However, many of the interviewees from Syria did not find themselves in that position, therefore they had to get the skills they needed by practicing in the field.

“I wasn’t really prepared to cover a conflict, however I was already in the Middle East working for Mustafa Bargouti. I have always been in contact with the locals, and I had lived in the Arab world for a long time, and this aspect helped me a lot.

⁴⁸ Arabic term used during the war between France and Algeria which identified a battalion or a company of soldiers during the Algerian War. The term was then used again by members of the revolutionary movements, especially in Libya.

⁴⁹ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, pp. 34-35

I studied a lot about the culture of Islam, I built relations and a reputation, especially with the Palestinians. I was able to build my own space thanks to my previous experiences and the relations I built with local organisations. I realised I had the instinct to know where to look and what to look to build a reportage or a news story.” (Francesca Borri).

When they started to report about the conflict, the majority of the interviewees had already gained experience in the journalistic world. Dhalia Kholaf worked for various international news outlets including the Wall Street Journal and Bloomberg and she also completed a fellowship in 2018 for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Cristiano Tinazzi and Ugo Lucio Borga could rely on their experience as freelance reporters, as they worked for different news outlets and covered various conflicts. Tracey Shelton, Rami Jarrah and Lina Chawaf studied Media and Journalism at university. Chawaf started as an ‘intern in a private Syrian radio, while Shelton stated that she was very prepared when she went to Syria, as she had spent much time in Libya covering the conflict.

“I knew how to handle myself in a war, I knew what was expected from me of as well. Culturally how to behave when staying with fighters, like even just to be respectful of their culture and what sort of things aren’t acceptable between men and women.” (Tracey Shelton)

Jarrah, on the other hand, had little experience as a journalist and when he decided to cover the conflict was very active on Skype using the pseudonym Alexander Paige.

“The members of these groups just shared videos and information, as there were also journalists in these groups that were gathering information” (Rami Jarrah)

Mansour Al-Omari and Sarah Kassim both studied English literature and then became journalists and translators, working for Western and Arab news agencies. On the other hand, Mahmoud Mosa and Francesca Borri had a lot of contacts among the locals and the NGOs and this aspect helped them a lot in reporting from the ground.

“After leaving Syria, I moved to Turkey. I started to work with NGOs and organisations, helping them to tell what was happening in the area where I used

to live. That's when I started to work and collaborate with journalists from different news agencies: CNN Plus, Sky News 24, BBC. I also made some interviews as I was the only one who could speak English in the area at that time.” (Mahmoud Mosa).

Some of the interviewees had a journalistic background when they started to cover the conflict. Mosa and Borri were the only ones who followed a different academic and career path at the beginning. Mosa was a school principal and Borri studied International Law at the university. However, when the war started, they took the opportunity to cover it, supported by the vast network of contacts they built.

The international interviewees were prepared to work in areas of crisis, excluding Borri who had almost no experience in war reporting, but she had lived in the Middle East for a long time. Therefore, they had a solid basis of means and knowledge that could support their work as reporters. On the other hand, the Syrian interviewees had little experience in reporting about war and crisis. They had to adapt to the situation, developing skills and using the resources they had access to in order to work in hostile environments. Some of them had to leave Syria, moving to Turkey or European countries to avoid being imprisoned, others decided to stay and report directly from there. Syrian interviewees had little opportunity to work for international outlets before the revolution and the subsequent conflict. This was probably due to the strict control exerted by the government over the media. When the situation escalated, they had to quickly decide whether to follow the government's instruction or move to other areas where they could be more independent in their reporting.

5.4 Building a network of contacts

Trusted contacts and sources were one of the key elements that allowed journalists to report effectively and to move around Syria. Some of the interviewees already had a network of contacts they could use; others built it over the time spent to report about the conflict.

Mosa started as a fixer, working with journalists who “wanted to cross the border, but they needed trustworthy people to go with them.” He had to create a network of people he knew and trusted, for the safety of himself and the journalists he accompanied. He

could gain credibility and he started to work with them, covering stories and sharing them on Facebook, as, at that time it was the main means through which activists could publish stories. Building a reliable network of contacts and sources was key in order to find valuable stories and being safe while reporting from Syria. Shelton stated that in the early stages of the conflict it was very easy to network and meet people and to form relationships over time especially 'where journalists had people that they trusted, certain commanders that they trusted, they had certain family networks that they trusted'. However, later on it became extremely dangerous, "because then they had to face these fighting groups that were trying to kidnap foreigners and if they didn't have people that they really trusted, a network of people to get through Syria, they couldn't really move in Syria in a safe way". A network of trustworthy contacts on the ground was important not only to receive insights about stories, but especially to move around safely in a context that was becoming more and more hostile towards foreign journalists.

"Sometimes it was just a matter of following the trail where I wanted it to go and sort of pushing to get contacts in certain areas and certain places. Within probably about a year I had some really close friends who were not involved in the fighting, like university students, I had a really close network of friends that had relatives in places that I used to stay, in various areas of Syria, and then I also had some really trusted commanders and fighting groups that I would also go to and stay with in various places" (Tracey Shelton).

Tinazzi relied on the support of local journalists, media activists and fighters in order to find stories and move around Syria in a relatively safe way.

"We actually relied on media activists. They were often young men who had no formal training in journalism, while others did. They were local photographers or journalists, who then started working for large groups, like Peabody or Reuters. Once, by pure chance, I met a group of young people, who were basically half soldiers and half media activists, since they also took care of dealing with the press. There was this young man, who basically had created a whole organization, whereby he would accompany journalists to follow those fighting in the Souk area, Omayyadi Mosque area, and he would take them with the

utmost level of military protection, because he had with him other armed people” (Cristiano Tinazzi)

Borri built a network of contacts step by step, based on reliable people that then ‘introduced her to other people’. She also worked with NGOs as ‘this kind of organisations are in touch with a lot of activists that might be helpful to contact sources, even in a place where journalists personally have no contacts, they can find stringers or local reporters willing to help.’ The Syrian interviewees already had a list of people on whom they could rely. Kassim had a ‘list of people’ she trusted to verify stories, the same for Jarrah who ‘had a list of news collectors and worked with the Committee to Protect Journalists to find media workers, citizen journalists or journalists’. As he used to run a radio station, he also had a ‘list of credible sources, who were known to be objective.’

“We wouldn’t release the information until they got us the evidence, that’s fine because we vetted them. So, we followed that process because we had protocols, as our radio station was getting support from international implementers that were providing support to bolster journalism in Syria” (Rami Jarrah).

For some of the Syrian interviewees, relying on the work of citizen journalists and local reporters still in Syria was the only available option, as most of them had to leave the country. Al Omari stated that “Syrian professional journalists had very few options: either keep working in Syria and for the state propaganda outlets, or leave the country, if they had managed to survive detention and hunting by the Syrian regime in the first place”. He was incarcerated and tortured for almost a year while he was working for the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression. However, when released, he was able to report about his experiences and tell the story of his fellow detainees. He then started working as consultant for Reporters without Borders, using his network of sources and citizen journalists on the ground.

“Citizen journalists became the most important part in the process of reporting the news, regardless of the extent of their commitment to journalism ethics or their knowledge of the standards of the press. Because Syrian media is controlled by state security, turning it into a propaganda and denial machine, reporting the

fact and news became a basic act of resistance by ordinary Syrians in their revolt against Assad regime.” (Mansour Al Omari)

Chawaf, who left Syria and founded Radio Rozana in 2013, still relies on the work of local correspondents on the ground. Rozana is ‘a big group of Syrian people who want to really create an independent media, deliver the information and give the audience access to real and credible news, not connected to any political party.’ Chawaf witnessed a radical change in the motivations of the stringers and citizen journalists working for Rozana.

“Now there are a lot of people who want to make money to survive, so they want to do this job. For Rozana, we choose the most professional ones, or the motivated ones. We try to train and work with them to help them become professional journalists. At the beginning of the revolution, we were receiving a lot of demands. The motivation was key for the people. Citizen journalists, stringers and local reporters wanted to deliver information, tell what was really happening. They believed that something was going to happen, they did it for freedom and democracy.” (Lina Chawaf)

5.5 Gate-keeping, news verification and limited access

As stated before, most of the Syrian citizen journalists, local reporters and stringers reported about the conflict as an act of resistance against the regime and to support freedom and democracy. They approached the coverage of the conflict adopting what could be identified as journalism of attachment or advocacy journalism⁵⁰. They could be placed on the subtle border between being called activists or journalists, therefore the information delivered, as stated by Jarrah, needed to be carefully verified and backed up by strong evidence in order to be sold to foreign news outlets. Most of the interviewees, during their experience in reporting the conflict, had to rely on the information provided by stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters who were also usually identified as activists. Kholaf worked in a newsroom, but also dealt with the content provided by citizen journalists while she was an editor for Global Voices. According to her “there were periods where local media actors were a valuable source of information,” however the information had to be verified “through various positive

⁵⁰ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, pp. 37-38

feedbacks, using resources and asking information to other journalists that could guarantee for them.” She also had to rely on secondary sources in some cases.

“It was very common, because there were many people reporting on the ground, and there were problems of accessibility to the places where the stories were. However, the news outlets started to rely less and less on secondary sources as they wanted to verify themselves. It is crucial to verify stories especially on social media. However, sometimes the lines of communication were cut off, so the news outlets had to depend on other people publishing information on the internet. The context is crucial to understand how much you can rely on local journalists as a valuable source of information.” (Dhalia Kholiaif)

It was only possible for Syrian media actors to work on the ground with one side of those involved in the conflict. The gatekeeper function therefore became essential in order to avoid fake news and verify the information. However, the main problem was that it was virtually impossible to directly verify information. Therefore, the only way was to collect feedback from reliable sources and other journalists and then cross check the information provided. Secondary sources were used only in case of emergency as stated by Kholiaif, because the content provided could lead to fake news.

“The war in Syria was obviously characterised by a large flow of information and also images that were generated by non-professionals. Therefore, it very often lacked time and place references and it didn’t even always refer to what was really happening in Syria. One of the videos that more deeply influenced the Sunnite groups, that we were working with in northern Lebanon, while waiting to enter Syria, was a video that seemed to show some of Bashar al-Assad’s soldiers using a chainsaw to decapitate two prisoners, who were thought to be members of the Free Syrian Army. That video had actually been filmed in Colombia and referred to an internal struggle among different FARC groups. The physical traits were comparable and it was therefore used as bait very effectively during that phase of the conflict.” (Ugo Lucio Borga)

Shelton also insisted that verifying the information in person before starting to work on a story, was absolutely fundamental. In fact, sometimes organisations and groups not

directly involved in the war would propose stories or share information to push journalists to cover particular themes.

“There were a lot of Christian groups in Syria who wanted support from Christian countries, as they were saying they were being executed. Of course, they lost their homes, they were kicked out, they had a lot of their possessions stolen, but they weren’t being executed in the street in the way that they were claiming. So it is always important to look at who is presenting a piece of information and ask yourself whether they have an emotional reason to be jumping to conclusions or not. Christian groups in the West were worried about Christian families in Syria and they saw photos of executions, therefore they had an emotional reason to jump to those conclusions and claim that their brothers were being executed in Syria. It is important to look at these aspects as well. There could be an emotional reaction, it might not be based on any truth at all, some people could just jump to conclusions and they might want journalists to print about that” (Tracey Shelton)

Credibility was a key point for citizen journalists, local reporters and stringers. However, it was also a great limitation according to Francesca Borri, as ‘news agencies would not believe them as it was easy to destroy their reputation’. She also added that ‘another great limitation was that most of these local reporters were following or supporting the Free Syrian Army, while the citizen journalists based in Damascus were seen as influencers or propagandists, therefore the information they provided was not taken into consideration’. However, all the information delivered by journalists could be considered one-sided. Borga said that “unfortunately, in that type of conflict, foreign journalists have to choose a side, stay with that side and tell their story.” Borga himself told the story from the perspective of the side he was with, the FSA, as he only had access to that limited pool of sources.

“We had to carefully verify a lot of information. We were basically trying to understand how truthful it was and trying to verify it on the ground. Moving around in the area was extremely dangerous and moving independently was virtually impossible in that context. Therefore, it was really hard to verify a story

due to the circumstances and we also did not have access to the Syrian Government's side and perspective." (Ugo Lucio Borga)

Borga was, he said, kind of 'embedded' with the FSA. As stated in the literature review, embedded journalism might compromise journalists' independence, however it usually enhances their opportunity to access warzones. Borri also stated that "working with stringers gives journalists an advantage, as stringers have a clear idea about editorial standards and what journalists are looking for." The interviewees agreed that the work of the media actors on the ground was key to provide a huge amount of content and information. However, the biggest problem for the news outlets was their credibility, which could be influenced by numerous factors. Kassim, on the other hand, said 'it was good for Syrians to work for foreign channels and report about what was going on, as they were witnessing it,' providing their personal point of view about the situation, as it was happening in their country. However, citizen journalists, stringers and local correspondents' perspectives could be influenced by activism and this could reflect on their ability to report about facts trying to be objective. According to Tinazzi, it was important 'to bear in mind that local journalists and citizen journalists supporting a cause tend to minimise negative aspects and capture positive aspects instead.' Mansour Al Omari believes that, at some point, 'journalistic professionalism became a great challenge for stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters', this might be due to their willingness to start working with big media outlets, sometimes lacking the standards required. However, 'the major crimes that these citizen journalists witnessed, affected them on a personal level. A number of them resorted to emotional exaggerations in depicting reality'. Al Omari himself recently recovered from health issues, maybe linked to the stress he suffered during his detention and his work covering the Syrian conflict. These are the traits of the so-called journalism of attachment, as it is difficult for the reporters to be objective while bearing witness to the horrors of the war and work through traumas that reporters could face too⁵¹. This is almost impossible when the journalists directly experienced these horrors as Al Omari did.

⁵¹ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, pp. 37-38

Jarrah, relied on the work of citizen journalists and local reporters, however, he selected them himself, trying to hire those who looked more professional, but most of the time he admitted he had to rely on his instinct to select his collaborators.

“We advised them not to move around with fighting groups, as that would be intimidating and they would interfere with the stories. We were careful in that sense about who we worked with. However, especially at the beginning, in the Hama region, we would send cameras to be handed out to people who needed to film what was going on. Then we found out that they were trying to control the narrative or they wanted to promote their ideas and limit the information to some extent. So, it did not work.” (Rami Jarrah)

In the Syrian context, local reporters, citizen journalists and stringers were therefore a great resource for media outlets, but, at the same time, they had to be controlled and guided in their work, constantly reminding them about the standards and guidelines that needed to be followed. They were both working as journalists and training themselves, learning on the ground the basic skills needed.

Chawaf is still in touch with many correspondents for Syria that provide content for Radio Rozana. She and her team work with them on a daily basis, telling them which stories they need to cover, but sometimes ‘if they find a good story or a theme worth covering, they tell us and we decide whether to follow the lead or not.’ Chawaf agrees that it is important to directly verify the story:

“Sometimes we check with two correspondents in the same area. We then try to balance the two different angles and the information provided, checking if the information checks. Then sometimes if the story is sensitive, we try to question sources through the correspondents themselves.” (Lina Chawaf)

Cross referencing was therefore key in order to verify facts, as the risk of publishing fake news was very high. Tinazzi said that a journalist must have the ability to understand those talking to him, why they are telling him things and what type of things they are reporting.

“Speaking and interacting with other Syrian journalists, who had been there for a long time helped me a lot. They basically had more knowledge than me, especially as a Westerner. The interaction with other journalists also simplified understanding and verifying certain information” (Cristiano Tinazzi).

According to Borga, the work of citizen journalists and local reporters was fundamental during the Syrian conflict, because ‘we know and learn so much about this war, thanks to the people's commitment in providing supporting material.’ In fact, journalists reporting on their own conflict (from within or outside their own country) might be motivated differently from those looking in from the outside. As stated in the section about motivation⁵² above, the Syrian interviewees actively participated in the protests and chose to report about the conflict in order to directly give their contribution and as an act of resistance. In addition, in the case of Syria, many of them took advantage of the possibility to freely express their ideas and report stories and facts without being censored by the regime.

“We cannot forget that these people often don’t even have any awareness of the fact that there are ethical obligations related to the distribution of pages, videos, opinions, texts, and information in general. And therefore, you can’t expect compliance with these ethical rules as you do in the case of journalists. The information provided must be analysed and verified. Otherwise, the risk is to have simple vehicles of non-verifiable information and, therefore, of possible propaganda not following any standards.” (Ugo Lucio Borga)

Tinazzi partially agreed, as media activists were trying to put too much emphasis on certain themes. Some of them were exaggerating numbers and data about people who died during the bombings ordered by the Syrian government, or they focused on the war crimes committed by the Syrian government, omitting those committed by the Coalition. However, the media actors who worked for international and local news agencies had greater respect for the standards knowing that ‘the international press would have kicked them into the gutter at the first slip-up.’ Tinazzi divides the media actors in two categories:

⁵² Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 177-178

“The pure media activists manage to evade journalistic and ethical standards because they are aware that in any case, they are not a news site and local media. While, the media actors who are already familiar with the concept of control on the part of international agencies know they have to verify information themselves.” (Cristiano Tinazzi)

Mosa did both, publishing photos and articles about people living the conflict on his Facebook page, but not when he was working for international media outlets:

“I respected the journalists I was with, so I had to film for them and not for myself. I published some stories while I was in the refugee camp, or while we were travelling around Syria with other journalists, but I always published news and stories which were not related to the main stories the journalists I was with wanted to cover.”

Like Mosa, citizen journalists, stringers and local reporters were also working as fixers, when possible, thanks to their knowledge of the region and their networks of contacts. However, they were also covering the conflict while accompanying foreign journalists. Sometimes this situation led to misunderstandings or tensions between their job and the work of the journalists they were with.

Kassim, on the other hand, had her own idea about reporting the conflict and the revolution in Syria, focusing on telling the world what happened as well as dealing with the victims and keeping in touch with them. It is important not to forget the tragedy that’s been going on or the injustice’. So, she works ‘just to deliver the message and to remind all the world that this is what Syria has been through. Because if we forget what happened we would not be able to help ourselves.’ The approach adopted by Kassim is similar to solutions journalism⁵³, strongly connected to peace and advocacy journalism. Solutions journalism focuses on the responses to social issues as well as on the problem themselves. In fact, Kassim reported on the responses to social problems, such as the recovery process of Syrian women arrested and tortured by the Syrian government. Jarrah as well identified the stories he and his teams published as Solutions journalism.

⁵³ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, pp. 38-39

“Whether it was a video report or whether it was a written report or whether it was a radio report, we would build them in a sense where we were identifying the problem. We were giving voices to different opinions in that problem, and then we were trying to provide a solution. So I was practicing kind of Solution journalism.” (Rami Jarrah).

The interactions between foreign journalists and the Syrian media actors led to a cooperation which was needed in order to cover a conflict hardly accessible for Western news outlets. However, Borga also approached this topic from a different angle. In some cases, as the Western media could not access specific areas, there was a vacuum in the media coverage. According to Borga, this gap could be sometimes filled by organisations like the IS, that began to broadcast images and videos as propaganda, produced by video-makers and journalists supporting their cause.

“The Western media were forced to chase that type of news, videos, information that already circulated on social media. Therefore, whether they wanted it or not, it was already news. Unfortunately, they sometimes chose not to analyse it. They sometimes underestimated what was the agenda of the Islamic State that was producing that content. Therefore, they somehow helped to spread the IS propaganda, whose main aim was to terrorize their enemies. It worked very well. They gained a reputation of cruelty, of brutality. Therefore, the Western media ended up doing exactly what the Islamic State wanted.” (Ugo Lucio Borga)

One of the main issues to emerge from the interviews was the inability of foreign correspondents and journalists to access Syria and the areas near the frontline. Furthermore, those who managed to get into the country were almost forced to join armed groups of the FSA or work with fixers and media actors linked to these fighting groups, in order to be able to move around safely. The news outlets had to work with and trust Syrian local correspondents to get stories, which had to be carefully verified. As it was almost impossible to work with Syrian journalists linked to the Syrian government, journalists and news outlets had to rely on the angle provided by the only side they had access to: the Syrian Coalition. These difficulties generated a gap in the media coverage, which was partially covered by stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters, however this situation also gave other organisations the opportunity to gain

visibility and media coverage. On one side, the cooperation between foreign journalists and news outlets with Syrian media actors was successful and enriched both sides. On the other hand, it enhanced mistrust between traditional journalists and Syrian media actors, who were usually seen as activists and relied on a frail credibility.

5.6 Editorial standards and guidelines

Western interviewees were used to following strict standards and guidelines when reporting conflict. On the other hand, Syrian interviewees had their own ideas about this issue and usually had to adapt to the standards requested by Western news agencies.

It was evident from the interviews that professional journalists and editors had a clear idea about the standards they needed to follow when reporting the war, however, they approached the coverage following their own ideas about building a story. Tinazzi concentrated more on reportage or ‘human interest stories’ and less on politics. He was interested in ‘telling people’s stories, and therefore in joining a brigade to collect the stories of those who were fighting, the reasons that pushed them to do it, as they might have been forced or radicalised, and also understand the reasons behind it’. In this case, the story was a lived experience and the information was directly gathered from the source. Borga also agreed, defining his reporting lens about the war as a ‘partial view, a testimony that must be inserted within a mosaic of other testimonies, which in the end, can offer a full picture of the situation. But individually, these pieces are just a fragment. It is the limitation of those working on the ground.’ Borri differentiated between the guidelines provided by Arab and Western journalism.

“In my opinion, English and American journalism is very strict about guidelines and standards you need to follow, while journalism in other countries is more into narrative such as Italy, France, Germany, Poland. They are more interested in feature stories and long reportages. When I was reporting about the Syrian war for an Israeli newspaper, I had the possibility to choose a particular point of view from which to report the story, also because they would be asking for a second piece in a week or two. I was therefore able to focus on a particular side of the conflict, tell their story and then focus on the other side just a week later. This gave me the possibility to report from different frames and perspectives,

creating, in the long term, different pieces that, combined together, could provide a more complete picture of the story. In Italy for example this approach was usually refused and I was accused of not being objective and supporting one side or the other.” (Francesca Borri)

Kholaif defined international news outlets as being more ‘selective and picky about stories’, as given the context of some countries in the Middle East, ‘it was important to act like that. Security, governments’ agenda and censorship affected journalism, like in Syria’. According to Kholaif, international outlets went for carefully selected news as opposed to local and regional outlets, which had greater access to cover stories, but they would apply different guidelines and protocols, exercising less care in their selection of sources. Shelton highlighted that many local reporters had no idea about the concept of being independent journalists, as the majority of them had been linked to a specific agenda or a political party for their entire life. They would tell stories from a certain point of view because that was the agenda, therefore many of them became the mouthpiece of the revolution.

“I think that’s natural if you’ve had 40 years under a government that always only publishes propaganda for the government. The natural reaction for anyone living there is to balance it by presenting media that is completely against the government. So, then you have these two sides and I think it will take probably decades before you can actually get to a point where you stop the balancing act and you actually come into the middle. This is different for Western journalism, obviously a lot of it is one sided, but there’s also the vast majority, I would say, which is quite independent. Regarding my experience, as long as I could prove it, as long as I could research it and verify it, I could write whatever I found” (Tracey Shelton).

Mosa worked for Western and local news agencies, so he could confirm that the Western news agencies had more rigid protocols, especially about getting involved with people around them while they were working.

“I remember one time, we were filming and reporting from an area near the city where I used to live and two FSA members started to fight. I intervened as I

personally knew them, they were my students, and I stopped the fight. I left the journalists I was with and when I got back, they told me that I had to respect the word “press” printed on my chest. I could not resist to intervene in that moment, I still saw these young boys as my students. Sometimes it is difficult to divide your job from your life. Especially in a situation like Syria.” (Mahmoud Mosa).

Jarrah founded his own news agency called ANA (Activist News Association) and started to spread information targeting the Syrian audience. Then, Western news agencies started to use ANA as a source. ANA started to grow, with about 40 local reporters working as freelancers. Jarrah worked with both international and Arabic news outlets and even got support from organisations and foreign journalists willing to help him with his project.

“We were providing stories and recruiting local reporters inside Syria. Working with Western media is much more difficult than working with Arabic media. In some cases, ANA was the first source of information on breaking news. I remember one episode. I got the story that the regime troops were trying to break into Aleppo in the middle of the night. So, I contacted Western journalists who trusted me, they waited to verify my information, they called someone else for cross reference. Verification was key. Whereas Arab media and local news outlets wouldn’t really care if it turned out that the news was wrong. Arab Media didn’t have a list of journalists who could be trusted. They didn’t really care.” (Rami Jarrah)

Jarrah and his team, along with other Syrian journalists and media organisations, gathered together to prepare what they called the Ethical Charter for Syrian Media⁵⁴. They attended a workshop which was organised by organisations such as IMS (International Media Support)⁵⁵ and FPU (Free Press Unlimited)⁵⁶ officials were also

⁵⁴ Last version of the Ethical Charter for Syrian Media: https://almethaq-sy.org/en/?page_id=756

⁵⁵ IMS works with local media in countries with conflict and political instability to provide content that is ethical, independent, critical and of public interest and making it accessible to all sections of society including marginalised groups. <https://www.mediasupport.org/>

⁵⁶ Free Press Unlimited is an international press freedom organisation that collaborates with over 300 local media partners in more than 50 countries. With them, They work on their mission to make independent news and information available to everyone. <https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en>

present, including Elisabetta Plebani, FPU Syrian programme coordinator. Jarrah and his team discussed and prepared the Ethical Charter with them.

“We produced it over a matter of a few weeks and then it was reviewed. The Charter was mainly like any other Ethical Charter. However, I was pretty happy with the outcome of this Charter because I think it was tailored for Syria. The key point was defining what was the public interest in a situation where you have two sides that are fighting each other. For example, if someone interviewed a member of Jabhat al-Nusra which is fighting factions that were linked to Al Qaeda, at different stages the interview could be published. It would be in the Western public interest to provide the name of my source, but it’s not necessarily in the Syrian public interest to provide the name. So, the main problem was identifying what was the target audience. If my target audience is a Western audience, am I doing it for the public interest of those that are in Syria who live in a totally different environment, or for the public interest of those that are watching the news that I am providing them? These were my main concerns” (Rami Jarrah).

Defining general guidelines and providing Syrian media actors with specific standards to follow in order to cover the conflict was the main challenge that international news outlets as well as Syrian news agencies had to face. Especially because, as already stated, the majority of the people providing content to the media were linked to the FSA and the Coalition.

“All these people that were working with us were people that wanted to see Assad fall. They were very aware that Assad was trying to push propaganda stating that IS was the only problem for Syria. That had a negative effect over their willingness and their enthusiasm to report on stories about IS. The Coalition had a serious problem with IS, but local journalists didn’t want to fall into Assad’s trap, focusing only on reporting about the conflict between FSA and the regime” (Rami Jarrah).

Most of the media actors reporting in Syria had quite general ideas about standards to be followed. Kassim stated that when she started to work as a journalist, she focused on

being 'honest and open minded to deal with the situation in Syria.' Because she had to 'take into consideration not to harm anyone or not to do anything that was not suitable for a journalist: it's very important the way a report is produced because it must deliver a message understandable and accessible for all the people.' Mansour Al Omari, stated that more and more Syrians wanted to give their contribution to cover the conflict, however at the beginning their work was not organised. Then groups of individuals cooperating with each other in all activities of the Syrian revolution were formed. Therefore, media centres and offices began to appear.

"While these offices were not able to be totally professional, most of them relied on the basic principles of journalism and started regional coverage, depending on the work of volunteers known as media activists. Later, mergers and attempts at structural development began in some of these offices, eventually producing semi-professional groups which often relied on volunteer staff as their correspondents. These volunteers considered their work in providing news as a part of their revolution against decades of press censorship by the Assad regime" (Mansour Al Omari).

Lina Chawaf, when she founded Radio Rozana, had to get inspiration from other news agencies to prepare their editorial guidelines. However, she had to adapt them to the situation in Syria and she and her staff created their own editorial line 'as a group from the beginning and together with the correspondents on the ground.'

"I remember the first day it took three hours just to be able to decide how we should mention the President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, in the editorial line. Shall we say the President of Syria or shall we say the President of the regime in Syria? We were trying to be at least objective and professional. So, it was not easy but we took a lot of time to put down our editorial line and we discussed a lot among ourselves to set out and try to really be very independent." (Lina Chawaf).

The editorial line, guidelines and standards to be followed was a controversial theme that emerged in the interviews. The Syrian interviewees tried to adopt Western journalism's editorial standards. However, in some cases they were influenced by their own political ideas or by the situation they were directly experiencing. Mosa and Kassim,

also mostly relied on their own idea of ethics while working, without adopting any standard models. On the other hand, due to this situation, the editors and journalists interviewed looked at this phenomenon with suspicion, recognising the work of the Syrian media actors, without identifying them as professional journalists, trying to verify the information provided at all stages, as also did most of the international media outlets. The next step for the Syrian media actors and the international news outlets interested in their work on ground, was to train them as journalists, providing the basic knowledge to report news following basic journalistic standards.

“I am working on a project with EGAB⁵⁷ in order to prepare local journalists to report on stories and get published on international outlets. Our trainees are mostly from the Middle East and Africa. We provide them the tools to get authentic and local stories, and if they can do that, then they have the possibility to work with international outlets. It is also cheaper for these outlets to hire a local journalist or stringer to work with them from a specific part of the world. Journalists express an interest in working with us, they send pictures and sample features. We go through them, we correct the pitches, provide guidance to build a story, contact sources and tell them how to build a pitch with global focus. We then contact our network of editors who work for global outlets and we promote the pitch providing graphics and photos. If the story is commissioned, we do the initial round of editing of the stories and then we pass upon to the global agency. We help the journalist meet the standards required by international news agencies and do the editors’ job.” (Dhalia Kholiaif)

These projects were also started by Syrian media outlets, realising that training was key in order to help stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists gain credibility in the eyes of the international news outlets. Lina Chawaf has been training the Radio Rozana’s correspondents since 2013. At the beginning, they were still able to cross the border and directly participate in workshops, mainly about information gathering, equipment

⁵⁷ EGAB empowers local journalists across the Middle East and Africa to publish stories in regional and international media outlets and help the latter find normally inaccessible unique and original content. <https://www.egab.co/>

needed, first aid and safety. However, now they have almost fully digitalised the process so the full training and courses are now online and accessible by the correspondents.

“The training does not have an end. It takes time to form a professional journalist and it depends on the person. It takes time, experience and at least two years of working on the ground with training to be almost considered a professional journalist.” (Lina Chawaf)

Jarrah also invested a lot of time training ANA’s correspondents and recruiting new reporters for his news outlets. Many of them were already working as media officers ‘embedded’ with fighting groups and “they used to just film people shooting.”

“We would take these journalists and we would put them through a process of workshops organised by NGOs, such as Free Press Unlimited. We used to give them equipment and tried to raise the standards of their journalism in terms of quality but also in terms of ethics.” (Rami Jarrah).

Jarrah said that during his recruiting trips he had two options when he met people who were interested in collaborating with his news outlets.

“If they were able to leave the country, they would leave and go to Turkey and then we would give them a place where they could stay. We had this building that we rented. So, we made the top two floors housing so they could stay there. And then we trained them. It would take around a month to get someone prepared. If they were not able to leave then I would do some field training with them. Mainly basics on how to film, how to take establishing shots, but also, ethics in reporting. Sometimes I unfortunately had to tell journalists that they could not carry weapons with them if they were going to report” (Rami Jarrah).

Borri also stated that one of the biggest issues about citizen journalists was that they used to carry weapons with them and sometimes, ‘they would leave the camera and start shooting and fighting along with the soldiers of the group they were with.’

“Once I saw this guy, from Orient TV, an Arabic Channel. He was doing an interview with a man and he had a Kalashnikov on his back. My colleagues and I were trying to be different. While training someone, we would focus on simple things, trying to explain for example, if someone is criticising the Free Syrian Army, why they had to report about that. It sometimes took hours to make them understand that simple point. They were usually young kids from twenty years old to thirty years old.” (Rami Jarrah)

According to the interviews, the biggest challenge that Syrian media actors had to face was to understand how to work independently and how to follow basic journalistic guidelines. This might be due to the fact that citizen journalists, local reporters and stringers were both emotionally involved in the conflict and directly experiencing the bombing and the fighting. Tinazzi said that while reporting it is important to use a ‘filter which is that of the external observer. If the journalist has a camera, that camera puts some distance between the observer and the event. This is also a form of emotional protection.’ However, in some cases it is impossible to use a filter as the reporter becomes part of what is happening⁵⁸.

“In Syria, I was with soldiers and volunteers, and at night, when we were bombed, there was no distinction between them and me. So, I had the opportunity to get to know them being together 24/7, I obviously became part of that context. I was no longer the outsider, I was not only an observer, but I was also part of that story. So, in these contexts, there is a certain coldness in talking about the other side. It just emerges from your stories.” (Cristiano Tinazzi).

Borri was aware of the limited angle she had access to while she was in Syria, so she preferred to tell stories using the first person, in order to specify that she was reporting from a point of view which was hers.

“I also told readers who contacted me, to read stories published by other journalists, in order to know different points of observation. I was in Aleppo, so

⁵⁸ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, pp. 33-35

I could describe that reality. I usually want to explicit my point of view and I am happy when my perspective is compared to others” (Francesca Borri)

Kholaif believes that the context is just one of the factors. Experience and professionalism also play a central role. In her opinion the guidance and experience provided by editors could be key.

“A lot of journalists can report something without making sure that all the voices are reported. This is something that could be fixed by the editor. Journalists have to make sure that all the voices are accounted for. Sometimes the best way is for a Western journalist to work with a local reporter to integrate their skills and get both points of views. Also, a Western editor and a local journalist might be a great team, in order to provide a richer story from a different angle and the journalist might look up at the editor and get more help and get detached from the story, as it is very easy for local journalists to get involved emotionally.” (Dhalia Kholaif).

However, in the case of the Syrian war, it was not possible to include all voices while reporting on the ground. This was the biggest limit that journalists had to face when working with local media actors.

“In conflicts like the Syrian one, local journalists by default pick a side. In this case, the war is characterised by such a depth, by such a division that could never tolerate the fact that a journalist jumps lines and works with one side and then the other. It’s impossible. Therefore, there is a clear distinction within local media, between those who side with one group and those who side with the other. Obviously, standing with the side of the regime, I often perceived a propaganda that was less subtle, more open, in some way, more obvious overall.” (Ugo Lucio Borga)

The difficulty of accessing both sides was also perceived by international journalists who therefore have a limited angle from which to cover the conflict.

“You always have access only to one side no matter how hard you try, but you are always going to have better access to one side than the other. Like in Syria, Western media are always going to fall on a slightly anti-Assad side, and of course other journalists are always going to tell the story from the government’s point

of view. I mean I have tried really hard to get as much balance as I possibly could, but I can't say my stories weren't falling more on the side of anti-government, because that was where all my sources were. I found it very difficult to get sources on the government side. I mean, I could quote local media, but it was just the officials' point of view. Whereas on the other side, I didn't just have what officials or leaders were saying, but I had what local people were saying and that's the real heart of what was happening. People on the ground, just normal, ordinary people." (Tracey Shelton)

Furthermore, in conflicts like the Syrian war, characterised by numerous sides fighting each other, lexical choices play a fundamental role. In journalism in general lexical choices are key in order to avoid bias, maintain the idea of reporting facts from a neutral point of view, as well as avoiding the influence of external factors while reporting. In addition, the audience could be also unintentionally influenced by the words chosen by journalists while reporting facts. The use of words is also central as they could be identified as important markers to pin down the frame of the articles, as illustrated in the news framing analysis chapter⁵⁹. But they also give the impression of biased or partisan reporting.

"The language that is used plays a key role and I think that by assigning a label to a certain group, it dehumanises it. So, it's really easy to write about terrorists. I wrote an entire article about how we use the label 'terrorist' in the West to dehumanise people and to turn away from the real story and what's really going on underneath. It's really easy to hate the word terrorist. It's much harder to actually hear a personal story of someone and then hate them. The Syrian Government uses this word all the time. I once wrote a story on Syria and I used the term 'regime.' I then realised that, by using it, I had just decided that it was a corrupt government, just by the fact that I had thrown that term in there. I really realised how much I had swayed that article, just by using that one word, instead of saying 'government' ". (Tracey Shelton).

Al Omari openly opposed the Syrian regime, following his own ethics which led him to fight censorship and report the revolution according to his own journalistic standards.

⁵⁹ Ref. Chapter 4 – News framing analysis, pp. 119-179

He stated that ‘for many Syrians, including himself, reporting about the conflict was an act of resistance against the government.’ His approach could therefore be labelled as advocacy journalism and journalism of attachment⁶⁰. Especially because he was directly involved in the revolution and he faced torture and imprisonment. Chawaf had a different view about reporting the war. She focused on the needs of the Syrian people and her priority was to give them voice.

“Political news is not our focus. We are trying to be the voice of the Syrian people. We want to approach themes and topics they are really interested in. We want them to discuss, to accept each other’s ideas, to learn how to accept differences and to get into an argument in a very peaceful way” (Lina Chawaf).

The kind of journalism proposed by Chawaf, according to the literature review, could be seen as both solutions and peace journalism⁶¹: focusing on implementing discussion that could lead to possible solutions and, at the same time, insisting on depolarisation in order to promote reconciliation. As she was forced to leave the country, she obviously opposed the Syrian government, but her main interest, from the beginning, was to give Syrians a voice that could actually be heard. Furthermore, her initial idea of journalism might be also interpreted as an act of resistance against censorship, similar to the concept expressed by Al Omari.

5.7 Objectivity

However controversial it may be and however contested, the Western conception of journalism highlights objectivity in reporting facts as a fundamental standard. Although this concept was clear to all the interviewees, they all pointed out the difficulties of being objective in a war zone.

“In my opinion, objectivity does not exist. You are in the field with your political and cultural background. This might influence you while reporting a story and you might not even realise it while working. Sometimes my cultural background greatly influences my thinking, even if I have been living in the Middle East for 15

⁶⁰ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, pp. 37-38

⁶¹ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, pp. 35-39

years, for example, my concept of guilt and of justice is really different from the one of the people who have lived here their whole life. On the other hand, it is easier to avoid taking a recognisable side, as it is against any journalistic principle. In addition, usually in a war the situation is “grey”, you cannot identify who is right and who is wrong.” (Francesca Borri)

When approaching what could be termed the journalistic shibboleth of objectivity, all the interviewees agreed that it was almost impossible to be objective in a context of war. However, this is particularly difficult in civil wars, which could also evolve into different proxy wars. In the Syrian context, it was therefore impossible for the Syrian interviewees to be objective, as they were living the situation and sometimes were directly involved in the events they were reporting about. Al Omari defined objectivity as ‘an indispensable element of true journalism by definition’, however, the events that Syrian journalists, including himself, ‘had to witness or were exposed to, negatively affected their lives and their professionalism’.

“This situation led them to sometimes take a clear side, which became evident in their reporting. Sometimes they tended to exaggerate in describing facts or denounce crime or actions committed by the side they were not supporting”.
(Mansour Al Omari)

Chawaf had to face difficulties in order to obtain reports that were as objective as possible, from the correspondents working for radio Rozana.

“It was not easy to ask the correspondents to be objective. During the training we try to explain to them why they have to be objective and professional, but when the correspondent is under shock or is facing a trauma, it is impossible to ask something like this. When a chemical attack hit Ghouta, we did not call our correspondent there for two days. It was not possible to ask him to cover it. We knew he was under shock. So, we were trying to get that news from other sources and correspondents that were less involved. We were trying to find a way to cover the news without asking him to cover it. It was so difficult for us to be neutral, even if we were not there” (Lina Chawaf)

Jarrah experienced the difficulties of being objective in a war zone. In his opinion, the journalists that could really be objective about the conflict in Syria were the ones that spent just two or three days in the country and then left. According to Jarrah, journalists that spent a lot of time in Syria, witnessing the horrors of the war, could not be objective.

“Imagine you are visiting the house of one of your interviewees and you are seeing him with his children, living in a city under siege. It is impossible not to sympathise with the victims. Once, I was with a Western journalist and we were sleeping. I woke up to the sound of a bomb and I saw him sitting there looking at the window with a blue light coming through. The day before he had walked with me across the whole area, he saw that it was a civilian area, with civilian infrastructures. The day after we went out and he saw all those buildings destroyed and the people he met were hurt or dead. I think he lost objectivity at that moment” (Rami Jarrah).

Kassim recognises the importance of being objective for a journalist, however, in some situations she believed that it is impossible not to take a side, following the ideas of Amanpour⁶² and therefore attacking the concept of moral equivalence.

“It’s really important to be objective because a journalist must deliver the facts as they are, but this is possible when civilians and innocent people are not harmed. In this case, you can’t be neutral because there are people who are killing civilians. You just directly take the side of the victims, denouncing the facts and sympathizing with them”. (Sarah Kassim)

Mosa stated that it is inevitable to get involved when reporting on the ground, assimilating the point of view of the people journalists are with. Therefore, the situation also influences the journalist’s capacity to be objective.

“When I and my colleagues went to film Al-Nousra and we had to get there with people who were part of this group, and of course their point of view prevailed

⁶² Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, p.37

on other frames. However, even if you try to be objective, in some situations you indirectly influenced by the environment you find yourself in” (Mahmoud Mosa)

Activism, cultural influence, direct involvement and political views, environmental conditions were therefore factors that influenced not only the levels of objectivity but also the frame adopted by the interviewees. Tinazzi believes that objectivity does not exist, ‘what really matters is the honesty of the journalist’. Tinazzi partially agrees with the ideas of Jarrah, as in front of human rights violations and war crimes it is impossible to be objective

“In the end, journalists can be transparent and respectful of their ethical code. You have to tell everything, without omissions. When I was in Syria, I couldn’t say I was impartial with everything that was happening in the area. I was objectively scared. This does not mean that if I got my hands on a clip of a war crime, or a human right violation, I wouldn’t report it. If I did not report it, I would be violating the professional code, but also my conscience and my sensibility. It increasingly becomes harder to remain neutral, as you get personally involved because of the emotional connections of the people who become your friends and reporting becomes more painful.” (Cristiano Tinazzi)

Kholaif had a different view, probably due to her job as editor. Her main purpose was to make sure that the stories she was going to publish were as objective as they could be.

“The story must be based on facts that can be proved by the contributors, or has to include as many voices as possible, in order to confirm the story. In addition, the story has to include the counterclaim if a specific entity or organisation is blamed for something, giving an explanation. The story needs to have all voices in it. Objectivity is key” (Dhalia Kholaif).

However, she recognised that in Syria this was not possible, as the correspondents did not have access to all the sources, especially direct government’s sources. She was only able to verify the stories provided by citizen journalists, stringers and local reporters, which had limitations, as explained above. Shelton stated before⁶³ that journalists

⁶³ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, p.203

reporting about conflict always have better access to one side than the other. This highly influenced their reporting:

“When I’m writing stories, I try my absolute best to include the opposite side. But when you gather information from different sources, from officials to civilians, belonging to different sides, they’re going to deny each other’s statements. So trying to be objective in these situations is practically meaningless, you’re almost just ticking a box for yourself, like making sure that you’ve covered all bases. The readers are mainly going to pay attention to the direct testimonies, no matter which side they support, because that’s where you’ve got the real stories” (Tracey Shelton)

The main problem is therefore, again linked to access. Shelton believes that ‘readers recognise when journalists have tried best to get the truth, but they are also able to recognise the bias in a story because sometimes journalists don’t have the resources to be completely objective and they do not have access to all sources’. According to Borga, journalists that cover conflicts such as the Syrian one, have to face significant emotional impact. Therefore, they need to focus on distinguishing between their own emotions and what they actually saw.

“You basically live with a group of people, who are constantly in danger. These people are killed all around you, they suffer damages, all before your eyes. However, we are not able to offer a wide view of the conflict because, as I said, it’s very difficult for a reporter to be able to say he fully understood what was going on. You inevitably have a partial view. It is a testimony though, so you need to be as transparent as you can be in reporting it.” (Ugo Lucio Borga).

The international interviewees focused on the concept of bearing witness of what was happening before their eyes. Being transparent and true to their ethical beliefs was key. While being objective was almost impossible, in their view, mainly due to the impossibility to access a full range of sources involved in the war. Access was definitely a main issue for foreign reporters, however their physical and ideological positions might have also influenced their ability to be objective. It is also important to highlight factors linked to attachment and advocacy, as foreign journalists built personal relationships with the people they were with.

5.8 Journalistic identity

By conducting a thematic analysis of the information gathered during the interviews, one of my goals was to highlight how the interviewees identified themselves.

All the interviewees identified themselves as journalists, as they saw their job as reporting on the Syrian conflict and the facts presented to them. However, the Syrian interviewees had their own conception about the job they did in Syria. The following quotes are typical:

“I define myself as a journalist, as a media person, as a funnel for human rights.”
(Lina Chawaf)

“I am an independent journalist, with a focus on reporting ethically on human rights issues. I also helped countless foreign journalists to report on Syria.”
(Mansour Al Omari)

“In the first few years I would call myself an activist. But then, I would claim I became an advocacy journalist” (Rami Jarrah)

“Let me say I am on my way to be a journalist. I am not going to say that I am a journalist, as I am just at the beginning of my career.” (Sarah Kassim)

“I feel I am a journalist. But it is not a problem the name they call me. I don’t care. I just wanted to do my job and report about the war” (Mahmoud Mosa)

The other interviewees had no doubt in defining themselves as journalists, probably due to the experience gathered during the years working in that environment.

“I am a journalist, working with different media outlets. I focused on sensitive issues such as integration, migration, terrorism, conflicts.” (Cristiano Tinazzi)

“I identify myself as a professional journalist, I have been doing this since 2006 and I studied Media at university” (Dhalia Kholaf)

“I started to study journalism in 2005 and I’m still a journalist now, I work for ABC in Australia” (Tracey Shelton)

“I am a writer and photojournalist. I focused on wars, humanitarian crises, social and environmental issues in Africa, South America, Middle East, Asia, Europe” (Ugo Lucio Borga)

“I am a journalist as it is my job. However, it is clear for me the difference between being a journalist and being an activist or a book author.” (Francesca Borri)

However, the international journalists I interviewed had a different perception of the Syrian media actors, defining them as key figures and contributors whose support was fundamental to cover the war. Crucially, they did not regard them as journalists.

In contrast with the perception the Syrian interviewees had, identifying themselves as journalists, the other interviewees only recognised their work in reporting news from areas which were inaccessible by Western media and mainly in integrating the work of foreign journalists, providing them with assistance in safely moving around the country, finding sources and stories worth to be reported. Some of the international interviewees also recognised the importance of working together with Syrian media actors, in reporting stories and analysing different points of view. On the other hand, they usually did not consider them on their same journalistic level. Ugo Lucio Borga highlighted that ‘it is important to remember that these media actors do not belong to a professional board⁶⁴. However, their support in covering stories and producing news was key. Thanks to their commitment the world was able to learn about the Syrian conflict’. Tinazzi believes that the development of web and social media helped the Syrian citizen journalists, local reporters and stringers in sharing their work.

“Foreign correspondents are no longer the primary means of information. The Syrian war, as well as the war in Ukraine, was almost a live war. It’s like watching a movie. In other words, we got a global vision of a war that could have never been told daily. This is the power of the web. Journalists also need to develop tools that are able to read and assess the content provided by the media actors working on the ground” (Cristiano Tinazzi).

⁶⁴ The Journalists’ Board is an Italian non-economic public body with an associative structure founded in 1963. The Order is a collective entity that represents the professional category. It manages the Register of Journalists, membership of which is mandatory for the exercise of the profession, and has supervisory and protection functions over the work of its members.

According to Borri and Kholiaif foreign correspondents and local reporters or citizen journalists should work together, in order to produce stories that might approach facts from all different angles

“Local media actors can fill in where foreign journalists are not so strong, as they know the culture and the area. However, in most scenarios it is not possible.”
(Dhalia Kholiaif)

“I have always worked with local reporters. Sometimes they also worked directly with me. In my opinion the best combination is to work with a local journalist, acting as photographer or co-writer. I usually consider them as co-author, as they build the story with me. However, according to the Western conception, they would not be considered as journalists.” (Francesca Borri)

Tracey Shelton believes that local media actors, even if influenced by activism, could start a path towards becoming recognised professional journalists.

“I do know one guy who was an activist when I met him, and over time he started trying really hard to become a journalist. He’s now in the UK, and he’s doing work for the BBC, I think as a freelancer. I think someone like that, in time, can become a really effective journalist. Citizen journalists and local reporters can cover stories deeper and have something that Western journalists can’t understand. They know the culture and the people. On the other hand, the Western journalists can be more independent, while local media actors can’t understand what it means to that same level” (Tracey Shelton)

Working with local reporters, stringers and citizen journalists was therefore seen as a way to enrich the content produced. But the international interviewees did not consider these media actors on their same journalistic level. Training and working experience with international news outlets becomes therefore fundamental for these contributors, who are partially recognised as part of the journalistic sphere, but they need to work according to the international journalistic standards. According to the international interviewees, the work of Syrian media actors could be limited by their lack of independence and knowledge of the international standards and guidelines.

5.9 Conclusion

While international interviewees were aware of the limitations they had to face in covering the conflict, trying to be as neutral as possible, the Syrian interviewees adopted a different angle to reporting the war, maybe due to the fact that they saw reporting as an act of resistance and giving voice to the victims and the Syrian people. The three quotes below graphically illustrate this:

“I am not with any party, I am just with the revolution. I am against the president, Assad because he is responsible for the death of many innocents.” (Sarah Kassim)

“Let’s be honest, by doing my job as a journalist, I was trying to influence people. I believed that the only way to actually change the situation in Syria was international intervention, I don’t necessarily mean military boots on the ground, but international effort and aid. I knew that we needed public outrage to pressure policy makers. It was a daily struggle for me to be as honest and as truthful as possible. Because I would always ask myself to what extent am I willing to break my ethics in order to achieve that goal?” (Rami Jarrah)

“Before the war many things happened in Syria, but nobody reported about it. When the conflict started, it was possible for everyone to see what was happening. I wanted to report about the violations perpetrated by Russia and the regime, targeting public areas, markets, hospitals, schools. I wanted to tell the story of people living the war inside Syria and show their suffering, but at the same time I wanted to show who was responsible for this” (Mahmoud Mosa)

Based on my interviews, it can be concluded that most of the Syrian journalists adopted an approach that could be identified as solutions or advocacy journalism⁶⁵. They also stated that they had clear political views and ideas. However, while Jarrah chose his approach which was in contrast with his standards as a journalist, Kassim and Mosa did not face this internal struggle, as they were following their own ethics. Al Omari also followed this path, focusing on ‘denouncing the crimes of the Syrian government against

⁶⁵ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, pp. 36-39

the Syrian population,’ as he was also a victim. He saw the revolution and the consequent conflict as an opportunity for Syrian journalists to finally gain press freedom.

“Caught in a dilemma of journalistic ethics and the need to make a living, further complicated by fear of retaliation, Syrian professional journalists had very few options: either keep working in Syria and the state propaganda outlets, or leave the country, if they had managed to survive detention and hunt by the Syrian regime in the first place. Consequently, they started fleeing Syria or the regime-controlled areas to the ‘liberated’ areas in Syria” (Mansour Al Omari)

There are therefore inherent tensions and contradictions between the Syrian media actors working on the ground or in exile and the international news organisations outside the country.

The latter don’t recognise those providing the information from inside the country as journalists, they seem to know the majority of them are activists and that they are directly involved in the war from an emotional or political point of view. However, international news outlets, foreign correspondents and freelancers seem to have no choice and have to use the material provided by the Syrian media actors, especially when they reported from areas that are impossible to access⁶⁶. Verification and gate-keeping are therefore their only options. International news outlets also integrate the content provided by citizen journalists, stringers and local reporters, with official government statements, trying to give a semblance of balance in reporting. Furthermore, the international interviewees also recognised that, while reporting on the ground about the conflict, they only had access to one side, the Coalition.

The interviews also illustrated that the boundaries of what it means to be a journalist might be considered very fluid, particularly in a conflict like the one in Syria. Drawing on Bourdieu’s field theory,⁶⁷ the interviews show how some media actors can - in specific circumstances - sometimes be admitted into the field of ‘professional journalism,’ following the principles of the *doxa*. However, other media actors are actively excluded from the field when, for example, they directly participate in fighting⁶⁸; others need to

⁶⁶ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 189-193

⁶⁷ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, pp. 29-30

⁶⁸ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 200-201

be trained to learn basic journalistic standards. Indeed, the need to train the Syrian media actors reporting on the ground was highlighted by the majority of the interviewees. It is impossible to clearly label the Syrian contributors who reported about the conflict, as they might fall under different labels at the same time. Many of them started as activists, or citizen journalists and then became local reporters, fixers and stringers, others became editors or funded their own news outlets.

The next chapter combines the above analysis with data gathered from the two other empirical studies on news sourcing and framing to address the thesis's research questions.

Chapter 6 - Discussion

6.1 Introduction

“Syria’s war may be the most documented ever. And yet, we know so little.” - Ivan Sigal, Global Voices⁶⁹.

Ivan Sigal’s telling quote illustrates the difficulty and complexity of covering a war where journalists from established news organisations have little access to the conflict and have to rely on a wide array of ‘media actors’ on the ground – civilians caught up in the conflict, local journalists, citizen journalists, activists, pro- or anti-government news organisations. There has been no shortage of information but much of it could be considered partisan and it is invariably difficult to verify.

This chapter pulls together the main findings and themes that emerged from the three interwoven strands of my empirical research - the sourcing analysis, framing analysis and interviews – as a means of addressing and answering the research questions that lie at the heart of this thesis. The foremost among these emergent themes was access or rather the lack of access. It was an overarching theme that ran like a thread throughout my research. Other themes I identified are closely related and also play into Sigal’s astute observation and address my research questions - the partisan nature of reporting, the inherent contradictions and tensions in news gathering and the shifting and fluid boundaries of journalism.

To recap, the research questions I posed at the outset of my investigation were:

- RQ1 What are the key characteristics of reporting about the Syrian civil war?

⁶⁹ Ivan Sigal, executive director of Global Voices from 2008 to 2024, a Kluge Fellow in Digital Studies at the Library of Congress, and the board chair for the Open Society Foundation’s Documentary Photography Project. He was a fellow of Harvard University’s Berkman Klein Centre for Internet & Society, a 2016 Nonfiction Fellow at the Carey Institute for Global Good, and a senior fellow at the U.S. Institute of Peace.

<https://theworld.org/stories/2016/12/16/syrian-civil-war-heavily-documented-repeatedly-ignored>

- How is the Syrian civil war framed across a diverse range of news agency and media outlets?
- How does analysis of the selectivity of sources used in media reports reveal the underlying influences shaping news framing?
- RQ2 Who are the media actors relaying information about the conflict and what challenges do they face?
 - How do they contribute to the coverage of the conflict and what is their role?
- RQ3 How do these media actors perceive their identity and how do Western news outlets perceive them?

The next section of this chapter gives a brief overview of the four themes mentioned above and how they help address each of the three research questions.

In terms of the overarching theme, international journalists and foreign correspondents had limited access to Syria and many of them had to enter the country illegally in order to report on the ground. Furthermore, as the conflict developed into different proxy wars, numerous journalists were killed or kidnapped, gradually leading foreign news outlets to rely more on the work of stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists. These media actors on the ground within the country had access to areas and stories that otherwise would have remained unreported. International news outlets, as well as journalists who managed to enter Syria illegally worked alongside Syrian stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters and their contribution was key to reporting about the conflict. This theme mainly helped me to answer RQ1, however, it also indirectly led to me finding out the other themes that emerged in my research project, as they are linked to it. The access theme therefore helped me answer the three RQs.

A second theme that emerged was the partisan nature of the journalism produced and the ways journalists functioned. Syrian stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters played a key role in the coverage of the conflict, however they could be influenced by propaganda or activism, as the majority of them actually supported one of the sides involved in the war. The Syrian media actors interviewed, who worked with international news outlets and journalists were ‘anti-regime’. Partisanship was also evident in the

contribution provided by the sources selected and used by the media actors, as well as in the work of two of the main news agencies under consideration: SANA and NCS. In addition, as the international news outlets and journalists relied on the work of the Syrian media actors, due to the accessibility issues, the partisan nature of journalism implicitly emerged in the stories published. International news outlets and Syrian media actors generally had access to just one of the sides involved (usually the anti-Assad Coalition), therefore the sources cited along with the media actors they worked with were usually linked or directly supporting one of the factions. This theme was key to helping address RQ1 and RQ2 as the partisan nature of journalism emerged as one of the main characteristics of the journalistic coverage of the Syrian conflict, as well as one of the challenges faced by both international news agencies and Syrian media actors.

A third theme that I identified was the *inherent contradictions and tensions* in how stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters perceive themselves and how they are perceived by foreign reporters, editors and news outlets. As stated above, the majority of the Syrian media actors who covered the conflict and the sources cited in the stories published were directly involved in the conflict, supporting the Coalition or the Syrian Government, however in the interviews, they generally defined themselves as journalists. This situation generated contradictions and tensions not only between international news outlets and stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters working in the field, but also among Syrian media actors. International news organisations and foreign journalists usually saw Syrian stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters as precious contributors, as they were able to provide stories reporting from places otherwise inaccessible and covered the war from a more personal angle, in addition they also practically supported the work of foreign journalists in the field and had access to various sources. On the other hand, their embeddedness and direct involvement in the conflict was not fully accepted by foreign media that saw them as activists easily influenced by propaganda. International news outlets needed the contribution provided by the Syrian media actors, but, at the same time, they would not recognise them as journalists and had to verify all the news provided through in-depth and systematic gate-keeping processes. Furthermore, the Syrian media actors who had previous experience in the journalistic field and funded news outlets had to face a similar problem with the stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters who worked with or for them on the

ground. This theme helped me to address RQ2 and RQ3, as I gained insights into who the media actors reporting about this conflict were and the challenges they had to navigate. In addition, through an awareness of the inherent tensions and contradictions I gained an insight to the perceptions Syrian media actors had of themselves and what the concept of journalism actually meant for them, allowing me to compare their perspectives and ideas with the ones of the international news outlets and journalists.

The fourth theme that emerged was the *shifting and fluid boundaries of journalism*. This helped me answer all three RQs. While Western journalists, as emerged in the three strands of analysis, were limited by hard journalistic boundaries, the Syrian media actors were free to move in and out the journalistic field. In fact, as their contribution was key for the coverage of the conflict, the international news outlets could not exclude them, even if they did not fully respect their standards, guidelines and ethics. However, the Syrian media actors who became too involved or were openly operating as activists directly excluded themselves. The international news agencies had to adapt to the work of the Syrian media actors, creating a network of reliable sources and contributors on the ground, improving their gate-keeping function and providing them with journalistic training. On the other hand, the Syrian media actors had to meet the basic journalistic standards required and respect the guidelines in order to work for international news outlets.

Each of these themes are key to my analysis and answering my RQs. They can be mapped as follows:

- Access (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
- Partisan nature (RQ1 and RQ2)
- Inherent contradictions and tensions (RQ2 and RQ3)
- Shifting and fluid boundaries of journalism (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)

The following sections review in detail each of the four themes mentioned above, as they have emerged from all three strands of analysis, and discuss how they address the research questions.

6.2 Access (RQ 1, 2 & 3)

Accessing Syria as a foreign journalist or correspondent was not an easy task. As highlighted above, international journalists had to enter the country illegally and many⁷⁰ of them were kidnapped or killed while working on the ground. Working with Syrian stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters was therefore key not only for foreign correspondents, but also for international news outlets. In addition, both Syrian media actors and foreign journalists did not have access to both sides, the Coalition and the Syrian government. International news outlets and journalists usually only had access to one side of the conflict, as working with one of the parties involved in the war, almost automatically excluded the chance to access the other one. As the interviews conducted for this study showed, foreign journalists often worked with media actors on the ground who supported the Coalition – they were the ones keener to work with international news outlets. In fact, usually the main aim of stringers was to provide the Coalition with global visibility and to enlist support from the international community.

The limited access also emerged as a problem for Syrian citizen journalists, stringers and local reporters working on the ground, clearly unable to report from the different sides involved in the conflict and in some cases not even interested in doing so. Therefore, as also shown in the sourcing analysis, Western news outlets had to rely heavily on elite sources, as easily available and verifiable, along with civilian sources who were easily accessible by stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters working on the ground. However, civilian sources were also easily influenced by propaganda or, in some cases, engaged in their own right with the side of the Coalition. Their contribution could be adapted according to the news outlet's agenda (especially in the case of SANA and NCS) or adjusted by the media actors depending on which side they were supporting.

The thematic analysis illustrated how Syrian media actors I interviewed were more motivated to report about the situation in Syria, as they were directly living it and sharing stories and information was for some a means to help their own country. Foreign journalists generally considered Syria a good story or follow up to the Arab Spring which most of them covered. As shown in the news framing analysis, the humanitarian frame

⁷⁰ According to CPJ data, 140 journalists have been killed in Syria, 5 imprisoned (annual census) and 8 missing. Syria is listed as one of the most dangerous countries for journalists
<https://cpj.org/mideast/syria/>

strongly emerged from the pool of stories taken into consideration. As the majority of the stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters directly supported the Coalition, they focused their attention on the humanitarian aspect of the war, trying to push the international community to intervene and support the ideals of the Revolution. In addition, as the majority of the news outlets (except SANA) relied on the contribution of the Syrian media actors linked with the Coalition and the foreign reporters usually worked with people supporting the Revolution, consequently the humanitarian frame strongly emerged in the majority of their stories, mainly because they did not have access to the other sides involved in the conflict.

The theme of access therefore represents one of the main characteristics of reporting about the Syrian conflict. The difficulties of accessing the country for foreign journalists as well as the impossibility for Syrian media actors to access the opposite sides involved in the conflict characterise the coverage of the Syrian war. This led international journalists and outlets to rely on the work and support of Syrian stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters, who were able to access the war zones and provide material and content. For Syrian media actors, getting access to warzones and areas of interest from where they could report, almost automatically meant getting access to the journalistic field. However, this also incurred limitations, due to activism and partisanship which characterise their coverage of the conflict. Verification and gatekeeping therefore became fundamental. In fact, many of these media actors were also directly involved in the conflict, supporting one of the warring parties and being activists. Local media actors could be considered 'interlopers' (Eldridge, 2018) as the majority, at the beginning of the conflict, could be considered citizen journalists, or activists, supporting one of the parties at war. Even those who had previously worked as journalists had to pick a side. Consequently, although they perceived themselves as journalists, foreign media outlets did *not* identify them as professionals (RQ3). In fact, the journalistic field is determined by the *doxa* that define the work of journalists. However, the *doxa* can evolve through dialogue and cooperation between those outside the field and those who are part of it, allowing interlopers to enter the field. Access is therefore a theme that represents both a key characteristic of reporting about the war (RQ1) and at the same time, a challenge for both news outlets and Syrian media actors

involved in the coverage of the conflict (RQ2). It provides an important context for the *modus operandi* of all media actors reporting the conflict.

6.3 Partisan nature of journalism (RQ1 & 2)

I was able to identify the partisan nature of journalism in covering the Syrian conflict in all three strands of my analysis. At first, this theme strongly emerged in the pilot study and in the news framing analysis, especially in the stories published by SANA and NCS. These two news outlets are the official media of respectively the Syrian government and the anti-Assad Coalition, therefore their agenda was strongly influenced by propaganda and activism, whether for or against the Syrian government.

SANA published stories that tended to enhance the military victories gained by the Syrian Army as well as policies adopted by the government to rebuild the country, provide assistance to the people and improve Syrian international relations. Alternatively, NCS insisted on spreading the ideals of the Revolution and denouncing crimes committed by the Syrian government, thus trying to gain the support of the international community. Use of language and source selection also reflected the agenda set by these two news agencies. Journalists working for SANA often referred to the Coalition and its armed forces as ‘terrorists’, while in NCS’s stories the Syrian government is usually identified as a ‘regime’ and its allies are accused of spreading ‘terrorism’ and ‘fear.’ The choice to use specific words instead of others, as previously highlighted by Tracy Shelton⁷¹, could actually change the sense or the tone of a whole feature, influencing the readers’ perspective and changing their angle towards issues or facts. In the stories published by SANA, the areas left by the Coalition are usually defined as ‘secure’ and ‘liberated from terrorism’, while NCS sees the Syrian Army as a ‘threatening presence’, especially for the security of civilians. The Syrian people were also the main sources used by the news agencies taken into consideration, however in the stories published by SANA and NCS civilian sources were just a means for propaganda or activism. They were used to praise the efforts of the Syrian government in improving life conditions for the population or to celebrate the victories of the Syrian Army. On the other hand, they were used by NCS to denounce the crimes of the Syrian ‘regime’ or to praise the ideas of the Revolution and protest against the policies adopted

⁷¹ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 203-204

by the Syrian government. NCS and SANA also heavily relied on élite sources⁷², as the news outlets were the main means through which the Syrian Government and the Coalition could directly talk to the public, stating their ideas and gaining visibility.

Élite sources were also used by Reuters, which aimed to report as objectively as possible about the situation in Syria, according to its standards and guidelines. As stated by the interviewees in the thematic analysis⁷³, Western news agencies and journalists had little choice but to work with or receive content mainly from stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters supporting the Coalition, due to accessibility problems. A news organisation such as Reuters is synonymous with traditional interpretation of the journalistic field, focusing on balanced reporting and traditional journalism. However, in order to gain information about the Syrian conflict, they had to spread their reach outside the boundaries of the journalistic field. Therefore, the only way to cite sources from the Syrian government's side was to rely on élite sources and use their official statements. Furthermore, as illustrated in the news framing analysis, Reuters tried to approach the conflict from a multilateral point of view, including humanitarian, political, military perspectives, aiming to analyse its impact not only on Syria, but on the world and the international community.

Reuters relied on a network of journalists based in different countries around the world, as well as on foreign correspondents working directly with Syrian media actors, including stringers and citizen journalists who mainly supported the Coalition. As stated above, Western news agencies and journalists were able to work almost only with Syrian media actors who supported the Revolution, including those who were forced to leave Syria as they risked arrest by the Syrian government. In addition, Reuters and the Western news outlets did not have direct access to other sources close to the Syrian government, while sources supporting the Coalition were keen to provide their contribution. As also emerged through the words of international interviewees in the thematic analysis, gate-keeping played a key function, in order to analyse and verify the information provided by media actors working on the ground, so as to avoid partisan journalism. According to

⁷² People who are often representatives of major institutions: government officials, corporate spokespersons, academics, experts and authorities on particular events or subject.

⁷³ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 193-194

one of the interviewees, Kholaf, the context is crucial to understanding how much it is possible to rely on local journalists as valuable sources. It was also important to look at who was presenting a piece of information and verify whether they had a specific purpose to propose it (Shelton). Borga and Tinazzi highlighted that it was key to verify facts in person and on the ground, however foreign journalists usually had to pick a side and report their story, as it was dangerous to move around independently. Verification and gate-keeping were also key for the Syrian interviewees: Jarrah and Chawaf stated that they tried to rely on the work of the most 'professional' stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters, verifying that their work could meet the journalistic values and standards required. Professionalism was indeed a great challenge for Syrian media actors (Al Omari), as it was fundamental to avoid explicit partisanship and allowed Syrian media actors to work for international news agencies. On the other hand, working with local reporters helped international journalists to better understand the dynamics of the conflict (Tinazzi and Shelton).

International news agencies relied on different sources and tried to approach different angles about the war. However, the main direct sources were 'anti regime' as shown in the case of Reuters and stated by interviewees. As emerged in the sourcing and news framing analysis, Reuters and Global Voices mainly referred to the Coalition as 'Syrian opposition' or 'rebels', this might be due to the Western conception of the conflict, considering the Coalition as a rebel group fighting against the official government represented by Al-Assad. This conception was in contrast with the one adopted by SANA that saw them as 'terrorists' wanting to subvert the Syrian government as well as with the one of NCS that depicted the Coalition as a free institution to be recognised by the international Community.

Reuters and Global Voices were edited through a Western lens. However, this emerged more overtly in the stories published by Reuters, focusing on the relations among the world powers involved in the conflict and the main changes in the global balance. The Western angle adopted and the contribution of Syrian media actors who supported the Coalition, implicitly influenced Reuters and Global Voices' coverage of the conflict, however partisanship was not as evident as in SANA and NCS. Reuters and Global Voices approached the coverage of the war following the standards and guidelines of Western

journalism which definitely influenced their journalistic choices. The nature of their journalism cannot be defined as partisan, however they mainly relied on sources and Syrian media actors close to the Coalition and this allowed me to identify implicit elements of partisanship.

Elements of partisan journalism also emerged in the stories published by SNHR. SNHR was used as a source by many news outlets and was considered 'super partes', as it focused on denouncing the war crimes committed against civilians by all sides involved in the war and mainly reported about the humanitarian crisis in Syria. They gathered data about casualties among the Syrian population, war crimes, humanitarian conditions and refugee crisis. However, SNHR's approach to the coverage of the conflict was not multilateral but tended to focus on a single angle, the humanitarian one. So, SNHR's perspective can be considered one sided. This news outlet mainly relied on the contribution of local reporters and the sources used were mainly civilians directly experiencing the conflict daily. Their contribution was not influenced by activism or propaganda, but by the context they were living in every day. However, SNHR usually did not have access to civilian sources or local reporters working in areas under the control of the Syrian government. The contributions and information gathered were usually provided by civilians located in areas close to the frontline or in refugee camps. SNHR coverage of the conflict could be defined as 'aseptic' and the stories published were short and totally focused on just listing facts, so the use of language could not be deeply analysed. The aim of SNHR was to spread awareness about Syrian citizens' political rights and enrich the humanitarian culture in the country⁷⁴. Therefore, its journalism could be categorised as advocacy journalism, as the main aim was to raise awareness about the humanitarian situation in Syria, implicitly pushing the International Community and the UN to intervene. It seemed that NCS and SNHR had the same aim, however, while NCS was pushing for foreign intervention to protect and support the Revolution, SNHR's only goal was to protect civilians and prevent a greater humanitarian crisis.

Global Voices on the other hand, mainly focused on the personal perspectives of both sources and stories' authors. This news outlet mainly relied on the work of citizen

⁷⁴ Ref. Chapter 4 – News framing analysis, pp. 166-168

journalists and local reporters supporting the Revolution. In the stories published the use of language was similar to the one adopted by NCS, such as ‘tyranny’, ‘regime’ used to identify the Syrian government, also focusing on censorship policies against local media. However, unlike NCS, Global Voices is not an official media outlet supporting the Coalition, but an online community that gives citizen journalists and reporters the opportunity to publish their stories online. Global Voices tried to provide a multilateral approach to the coverage of the war, highlighting the personal angle of sources and contributors, however its gate-keeping was not as strong as that practiced by Reuters. The approach of Global Voices to the Syrian conflict is therefore humanitarian-civilian based, mainly focusing on the contribution of people who directly experienced the war and on sources who lived in warzones and described their daily life, providing direct testimonies of the horrors of the conflict. The majority of Global Voices’ Syrian contributors, including the sources cited, supported the Revolution and its ideals, therefore their angle, even if personal, could sometimes be influenced by activism. The influence of activism or propaganda, in fact, was one of the main issues that news outlets, journalists and Syrian media actors had to face. In the thematic analysis it emerged that the majority of Syrian interviewees, who directly contributed to cover the war and worked for international news outlets, were activists or were openly opposing the Syrian government. Nonetheless, their contribution was key for the news outlets, unable to access Syria or, at least some areas of the country.

Partisanship emerged in all areas of analysis. According to the data from the interviewees, on the ground reporting was mainly based on the work of Syrian media actors supporting one of the warring parties or foreign correspondents who were usually accompanied by stringers, citizen journalists, fixers and local reporters linked to one of the factions at war (mainly the Coalition). The partisan nature of journalism strongly emerged in the information gathered from the interviews with Syrian media actors, who, at least at the beginning of the revolution, were mainly media activists and whose main aim was to denounce the crimes of the Syrian government⁷⁵. Syrian media actors can be therefore considered as agents of transformation, as defined by Bourdieu (1983), applying pressure on the *doxa* from outside the field. However, these agents are shaped by different factors, such as personal experience, judgements, and other

⁷⁵ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 191-193

conditions (Bourdieu 1993). According to Benson and Neveu (2005), in order to establish themselves, new agents usually adopt new editorial voices or approach journalism from a different perspective, probably due to the situation they find themselves. And the interviews show that this was the case with the media actors covering the Syrian conflict. According to the data gathered in the interviews, the support of international news organisations, foreign journalists and NGOs, enabled Syrian media actors to gradually improve their work and moved towards what could be viewed as Western professional journalism standards. Foreign journalists who worked with Syrian contributors recognised the partisan nature of their work, but they also highlighted that cooperation and integrating their own work with the reporting by Syrian media actors was possible and led to fruitful collaborations. Kholaf stated that local media actors can fill in where foreign journalists are not so strong and Shelton agreed as they can cover stories in greater depth and they understand the culture and the people (another access issue, in terms of what people will share). The latter was a key point, because, as highlighted in the sourcing analysis, civilian sources were the most used in the stories analysed for this study. The training and the process of adaptation to Western journalistic standards undertaken by local media actors, could be considered part of their trajectory (*habitus*) towards being recognised as part of the journalistic field. By adapting to more professional standards and working on the field for Western news outlets, local media actors were trying to break through the boundaries of the journalistic field, moving towards the centre of the field

Partisanship was also evident in the source selection. SANA and NCS used civilian sources as a means to praise the party they were supporting and denounce the crimes of the counterparts. While SNHR, Reuters and Global Voices, used civilian sources as testimonies to describe the situation on the ground, however they could not avoid partisanship, as most of the sources were supporting one of the sides at war and would actually omit some information, or exaggerate other statements. Therefore, this information had to be integrated with the contribution of *élite* sources, which were available from both sides, however, as stated by Shelton⁷⁶ reporting official statements where the sides contradict each other is not really interesting for the audience, usually more attracted by personal stories. In the news framing analysis chapter, the partisan nature of journalism also emerged. SANA and NCS focused on covering stories and

⁷⁶ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 203-204

highlighting information that could be useful for the cause of the side they were supporting. SNHR and Global Voices did not embrace the idea of providing a general picture of the war, focusing on the aspects they were more interested in, respectively humanitarian and personal angles. Reuters tried to provide a wide and multilateral coverage of the conflict, however, had to face issues linked to accessibility and verification on an angle focusing on the impact of the Syrian conflict in the Western world and how this could affect the balance among the world powers.

In summary, the contribution of Syrian media actors was, at the same time, fundamental for international news outlets, but also constituted a problem due to the partisan nature of their coverage. The international media tried to limit this issue through gate-keeping and cross-checking of facts, especially by building a wide network of reliable sources and collaborators on the ground. Furthermore, foreign correspondents and Western journalists that could access Syria faced the same problem. The majority of them could only work with activists or sources close to the Coalition, moving around with them for safety reasons. In the thematic analysis, according to the five interviewees and editors who were not from Syria, this situation allowed them to report about facts they could directly verify, but they could only provide a partial picture of the conflict, as they could not access sources close to the other sides involved in the war. The Syrian conflict was therefore reported from various and different angles, influenced by different external and internal factors mainly linked to activism and propaganda. However, as stated by Borga⁷⁷, this situation resulted in a mosaic of different testimonies from different perspectives that the public must put together in order to obtain a general picture of the whole situation.

The partisan nature of journalism in the Syrian conflict represents one of the key characteristics of the coverage of the war, along with the theme of access (RQ1). Furthermore, partisanship is also one of the main challenges that Syrian media actors had to face (RQ2). In fact, they were trying to report about the conflict, but at the same time, they were supporting one of the parties involved (mainly the Coalition, according to the ones I interviewed). They had therefore to find a balance between reporting facts and their commitment as activists. As previously stated, this situation also represented

⁷⁷ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 201-203

a challenge for foreign journalists and international news agencies interested in covering the conflict in Syria, who had to adapt to the context and find new solutions to work with Syrian citizen journalists, fixers and stringers. The latter were people who decided to report about the conflict, many of them did not have any journalistic experience or background. Therefore, training them in order to match basic Western journalistic standards became fundamental for news outlets, as their contribution was key. This was possible thanks to diaspora journalists, who left Syria but still had contacts and correspondents living there and providing news from the ground. However, at the same time, adopting standards and guidelines also represented a challenge for the media actors themselves, who needed to find a balance between their role as contributors and as activists. Therefore, partisanship was still present in their reports and news outlets had to adapt to the situation and work with them in order to produce journalistic content that could be accepted in the newsroom. This actually provided dynamism to the journalistic field, thanks to the interaction between new agents acting outside the field and those already placed inside their its boundaries.

6.4 Inherent contradictions and tensions (RQ 2 & 3)

The Syrian media actors I interviewed identified themselves as journalists. The majority of them covered the conflict and shared content on social media in order to support one of the warring parties or to gain help for their country, at least at the beginning. Therefore, my research led me to conclude that the stories provided to news outlets were either implicitly or intentionally influenced by either propaganda or activism. The Syrian media actors working with international news outlets or journalists were ‘anti-government’ activists supporting the Revolution, who were reporting about the conflict as ‘an act of resistance’⁷⁸ against the Syrian government, as stated by Al Omari. While reporters working for media outlets linked to the Syrian government (such as SANA), were strongly influenced by propaganda and their work was constantly checked and under the control of the Syrian authorities, therefore they were not authorised or interested in working with foreign outlets. On the other hand, international media outlets and journalists, due to limited accessibility to Syria, had to rely on the work of Syrian media actors, facing inherent tensions and contradictions not only between

⁷⁸ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, p. 186

themselves and the Syrian media actors working in the field, but also among Syrian stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters, as stated by Rami Jarrah⁷⁹.

In fact, international news outlets and journalists faced the challenge of going through a large number of stories published and proposed (RQ2). In-depth verification and gate-keeping processes were therefore needed in order to avoid misinformation and build a reliable network of collaborators and sources on the ground, as I found out from the information gathered in the interviews. The Syrian media actors were activists whose credibility was fragile and who did not always respect basic Western journalistic standards, both in reporting on the field and in the selection of sources. This generated tension between the international news outlets and the Syrian contributors, but it also led to a gradual process of change. The news outlets slowly adapted to this situation and started to select the most 'professional' local reporters, stringers and citizen journalists to work for them⁸⁰, while the Syrian contributors gradually embraced the journalistic standards and guidelines requested. In fact, as stated by Bourdieu (1993), the journalistic field is characterised by heteronomy and constant transformation, which allow new agents to enter the field and gradually start a process of change. The local reporters working for NCS and SANA did not change their approach to journalism, probably because the influence exerted by the Coalition or the Syrian government was too strong. However, as highlighted in the thematic analysis, the Syrian media actors who funded news agencies or usually worked for them wanted to be trained and prepared to provide content that was ready to be used. This is key for interlopers to be accepted in the field and penetrate its boundaries.

The majority of the Syrian interviewees defined themselves as 'activists' and journalists at the same time, while international news outlets and journalists did not recognise them as having the status of journalists. This was another significant contradiction I identified. Even if foreign news outlets and journalists did not consider Syrian media actors as professionals, they were aware of their importance in reporting about the conflict and therefore they relied on their work. Even if, foreign journalists and news outlets tried to keep a certain professional distance between themselves and the Syrian

⁷⁹ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 198-201

⁸⁰ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 198-201

contributors, Syrian media actors could gradually gain access training as professional journalists with the support of external organisations and NGOs, due to their importance in the coverage of the conflict. Furthermore, the Syrian media actors who had received journalistic training and an academic education, were pushed to fund news outlets in Syria or abroad based on the Western journalistic standards and guidelines.

These local news agencies played a key role in building a network of reliable correspondents working on the ground that received basic journalistic training and were also ready to work with foreign journalists and news outlets. Citizen journalists, local reporters and even media activists also gradually organised themselves into press offices or semi-professional organisations using volunteers as correspondents on the ground. This helped the international news agencies in their verification processes and also allowed them to access more reliable sources or media actors that were aware of their needs. As stated by Jarrah, the Syrian media actors also started a process of 'sources education.' As I highlighted in the sourcing analysis, civilian sources were the most used, however they did not always tell the truth or say what they really thought. Jarrah stated that sources interviewed on the ground were usually keener to say what they believed the interviewer wanted to hear. This was mainly due to the oppressive control policies on the media industry that the Syrian government had exerted for many years. Therefore, interviewees and even local reporters did not know the meaning of free press⁸¹ as highlighted by Tinazzi and Shelton. Syrian media actors, as well as the sources on the ground, had to embrace and familiarise themselves with a new concept of journalism, more independent and closer to the Western conception.

Despite the changes and processes of adaptation that occurred in coverage of the conflict, involving both Syrian media actors and international news agencies, it is important to highlight that the contribution provided by the Syrian media actors was still influenced by activism and propaganda and their fragile credibility was easy to undermine. This was in fact one of the main issues that international news outlets and journalists had to face. As I found out in the thematic analysis, the majority of international journalists and editors highlighted that Syrian citizen journalists, stringers and local reporters sometimes exaggerated facts or data (e.g. the number of civilian

⁸¹ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 195-196

casualties) in order to allow certain stories to get more visibility, or deliberately would omit information that would otherwise damage the reputation of the side they were supporting⁸². Furthermore, many stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists, even if considered key contributors, lacked in-depth training and knowledge of the fundamental journalistic standards and guidelines required by international news outlets. The gate-keeping process was still fundamental in selecting the stories worthy of publication, mainly relying on the network of collaborators present on the ground, cross checking the information in order to receive multiple confirmations. However, sometimes fact-checking could actually be impossible, as stated by Kholaf, and news outlets had to rely on the information provided by just one source. As shown in the news framing analysis, the news outlets in the study adopted different approaches. SNHR relied on citizen journalists and local reporters based on the ground working under the strict supervision of editors and SNHR's agents. Reuters based its coverage on the work of correspondents based in the Middle East and Turkey, relying on the information provided by Syrian media actors, carefully checked by a team of editors. The same approach was also adopted by Global Voices, which left more room to citizen journalists to express their personal angle. NCS and SANA exerted a strict control on the reporters working for them, adapting stories and selecting sources according to their agenda strongly influenced by propaganda. It was therefore fundamental for SANA and NCS mainly to control the work of their reporters, not to verify information. Sources were also selected and used as propaganda means, while for SNHR, Global Voices and Reuters sources were key to confirm information and provide different angles.

As stated before, although Syrian media actors tried to fill the gap between themselves and international journalists, it did not always work. Stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters, collaborated with foreign correspondents, attended and organised training courses, tried to work following the standards and the guidelines provided by the international news agencies. Syrian media actors, especially those with a journalistic academic background and field experience in the media industry, tried to raise the standards by adopting ethics charters, gaining the support of NGOs and recruiting motivated people that could work professionally. The local news outlets or radio stations, along with organised press offices and media centres improved the general

⁸² Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, p. 192

journalistic level, as these organisations also provided journalistic equipment to their collaborators. However, many Syrian media actors, including the interviewees, found themselves in the middle between using journalism as an “act of resistance” and following strict journalistic guidelines required by international outlets. They usually did not embrace either of them, preferring to adopt ethics charters tailored for the situation or approach journalism according to their personal idea, not always in line with the basic journalistic guidelines.

Tensions and contradictions surrounding Syrian media actors’ work and perception of themselves could be due to their initial inability to comfortably move in a journalistic environment that was relatively free, as it had never happened in Syria before the Revolution and the subsequent conflict. They therefore had the possibility to report freely about the situation, also expressing their own ideas, however, they were also strongly influenced by what was actually happening in Syria: destruction, violence, fights, humanitarian and a refugee crisis. They reported facts, but at the same time chose a clear side and actively supported it thanks to their work. This was the main tension and contradiction I found out among Syrian media actors. The majority of them wanted to report about the conflict, but also aimed to support the side they chose.

Inherent tensions and contradictions provided challenges for the Syrian media actors in covering the conflict. International news outlets were interested in the stories and the contribution provided by the stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists working in the field, but they also saw them as mainly activists, who were not always working according to the journalistic standards and inclined to be influenced by various factors. Tensions and contradictions were therefore present in the professional relationships between Syrian media actors and international news agencies. The latter needed the contribution provided by the media actors, but did not always support their methods and their approach to journalism. As resulted from my research, international news agencies had to face this controversial situation, through in-depth verification of the stories provided and gate-keeping processes, but also they tried to adapt to the situation, providing training in order to transform Syrian media actors into professionals that could work according to the international news outlets’ standards. These inherent tensions and contradictions between local media actors and foreign journalists highlight

the theme of the continuous external influences to which the journalistic field is subject. Local media actors act as forces of transformation, while foreign journalists and news outlets act as forces of conservation. This tension usually leads to what Eldridge (2018) defines as a normalisation process. New journalistic routines are transformative while existing ones are conservative. In the case of those interviewed in this thesis, it was possible to observe a process of gradual adaptation, often born of necessity.

The theme of inherent tensions and contradictions clearly highlights the problem of how Syrian media actors are perceived by international news agencies and how they perceive themselves (RQ 3). Stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters are usually identified as fundamental contributors, but not as professional journalists in stark contrast with their own perception of their role. Their contribution was key when needed but did not grant them full acceptance in the journalistic field.

6.5 Shifting and fluid boundaries of journalism (RQ 1, 2 & 3)

As highlighted in the thematic analysis⁸³, the interviewees identified themselves as journalists, however the five international interviewees, also considered professional journalists, did not recognise the Syrian interviewees on their same level. As previously explained, there are distinct tensions and contradictions between how the Syrian media actors are perceived by traditional journalists and international news outlets and how they perceive themselves (RQ 3). These tensions and contradictions about the identity and the role of Syrian media actors can be viewed through the lens of Bourdieu's field theory⁸⁴ and the concept of interlopers and their role⁸⁵, outlined in the literature review chapter. Stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists are usually placed by established journalists outside the boundaries of the journalistic field. However, these media actors are sometimes allowed to actually enter the field, especially when their contribution is particularly relevant.

The main issue for the Syrian media actors was that, while Western journalists have some hard boundaries which they often rigorously respect, stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters covering the conflict often found themselves in a transition, acting as new agents trying to penetrate the boundaries of the journalistic field.

⁸³ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 209-212

⁸⁴ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, Bourdieu (1993) pp. 28-29

⁸⁵ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, Eldridge (2018) pp. 28-30

Their journalistic contribution was fundamental, however their strong link to activism or propaganda, their partisanship, mainly due to their embeddedness, along with their direct emotional attachment to events occurring in their country, automatically excluded them from the field. Some interviewees directly witnessed stringers, local reporters or citizen journalists moving around armed or fighting alongside soldiers, while working on the ground, being emotionally involved with the sources, unable to respect the basic journalistic standards and rules (*doxa*). This situation also affected the selection of sources. Syrian media actors had access to a large network of direct sources that were difficult to reach for foreign journalists, however, they were mainly people influenced by activism or propaganda, or directly supporting one of the warring parties. Syrian media actors were unable to extract truthful information from the interviews, as interviewers and interviewees were directly supporting the same side. As previously stated, this also led to omitting information or exaggerating facts, automatically excluding them from the boundaries of the journalistic field.

Although the boundaries of the journalistic field are not clearly defined, the strands of my research showed they are fluid and continuously shifting. This factor, along with the access issues faced by foreign journalists, allowed Syrian media actors to move in and out of the field providing key information and support to the international news agencies that would otherwise have had no access to the content.

The key role played by Syrian media actors in reporting about the conflict also grew when they started to fund news outlets or radio stations on their own. They were still considered to be outside the boundaries of the journalistic field as understood by established Western news organisations, but by creating news outlets regulated by guidelines and ethic charters inspired by the ones adopted by the international news outlets, they tried to organise and regulate their work in the field, gaining more credibility and in Bourdieu's terminology, increasing their capital. International journalistic organisations and NGOs helped the Syrian media actors in this matter, organising training courses and funding development programmes along with providing equipment needed for their journalistic work. Furthermore, those media actors forced to leave Syria, sometimes known as diaspora journalists, often moved to Western countries where they could fund their own news outlets and organisations. These outlets usually relied on the work of stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters in

the field, supporting their work, providing training and funding and giving them the possibility to work and grow in a more organised and professional environment. On the other hand, a major issue was the background of many diaspora journalists. The ones I interviewed were former anti-government activists - it could be argued that their approach was therefore, even slightly, influenced by their own preconceptions and ideals about the war. Syrian media actors and diaspora journalists worked following ethics, guidelines and standards that were tailored for the situation they found themselves in and for the audience they wanted to approach. Whereas, the standards and guidelines followed by the international news outlets are based on the traditional Anglo-American concept of journalism respecting the boundaries marking the field. Syrian media actors not only aimed to report about the situation and the conflict in Syria, but they also wanted to promote discussions⁸⁶, raise awareness about the situation with the intention to push for international intervention to protect the freedom gained through the Revolution. The work of Syrian media actors provided insightful angles on stories about the conflict and allowed them to report from areas inaccessible by foreign reporters, but, at the same time, the nature of their work contributed to the tensions and contradictions mentioned in the section above. However, they also adopted a more distinctive editorial voice which differentiated them from foreign journalists.

As I found out in my research, these fluid and shifting boundaries of journalism allowed Syrian stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters to enter the field and directly contribute to the coverage of the conflict, as their work was key and invaluable. But the tensions between them and professional journalists, along with the contradictions that characterised their work, did not allow them to stay in the field. They therefore fall under the definition of interlopers⁸⁷, continuously entering, moving out and around the journalistic field, without attaining stability. However, in the thematic analysis I highlighted that by continuous training and by gaining journalistic experience working with news outlets as well as professional journalists and editors, these media actors could actually gain recognition and 'status'. From my study, it emerged that the boundaries of the journalistic field are blurred and not clearly marked. In the case of the

⁸⁶ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, p. 205

⁸⁷ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, Eldridge (2018), pp. 29-31

Syrian conflict, these boundaries became shifting and fluid, gradually adapting to the situation.

The theme of shifting and fluid boundaries of journalism is one of the key characteristics of reporting about the Syrian conflict (RQ 1). Thanks to the adaptation process undergone by news outlets and journalists, the contribution of Syrian media actors became fundamental, despite all their limitations. On the other hand, the shifting and fluid boundaries also represented a challenge for Syrian media actors, as, once they were accepted in the field as a result of their work, they could easily be excluded, due to their direct involvement in the conflict (RQ 2). Accessing the field did not mean being automatically recognised as a professional journalist.

6.6 Conclusion

In my research study I was therefore able to find out that the reporting about the Syrian conflict is characterised by lack of access for journalists, not only to the country, but also to the different warring parties involved. The work of Syrian local reporters, stringers and citizen journalists became key to support foreign journalists and to cover the war. Their work for international news outlets allowed these media actors to move in and out the journalistic field, through boundaries that have gradually become more blurred or fluid. The Syrian media actors provided a great amount of information and material, however their direct involvement in the conflict and their 'activism' led them to produce content where the partisan nature of their journalism emerged. This partisanship could have also indirectly influenced the material published by foreign journalists and international news outlets that could only work with Syrian contributors supporting one of the warring parties (especially the Coalition). Syrian media actors had to face difficult challenges, especially gaining credibility and trust, in order to work for international news outlets and journalists. In fact, their activism and support towards one of the sides involved in the conflict led to inherent tensions and contradiction among the Syrian media actors themselves, as well as between them and the news outlets or the journalists they were working with. Furthermore, the 'identity' of Syrian media actors was also an important issue that I highlighted in my research. While they usually identified themselves as journalists, they were usually not considered as professional journalists by the news agencies or foreign correspondents they worked with, relegating

them to the boundaries of the journalist field. Syrian media actors could be mainly considered as new agents trying to penetrate the journalistic field, encountering resistance from those agents already part of it. This situation led to a gradual process of adaptation undertaken by both sides, recognising that each of them needed the key contribution of the other.

In the next chapter I will draw conclusions about my study and look ahead to possible future research and how my study might be used to investigate other conflicts.

Chapter 7 - Conclusion

The Syrian war represents a paradigmatic example of how international news agencies and Western journalists had to work with local media actors present on the ground in order to access information otherwise almost inaccessible.

As a result stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists became key figures in the coverage of the conflict and not just occasional contributors working with foreign correspondents, who in many conflicts can just fly in and out. The Syrian war has also been a 'live war', as information about what is happening is shared almost immediately on social media and is therefore accessible to a large audience. The challenge for both international news organisations and local media actors has been to adapt to this situation and to find a way to efficiently cooperate in order to provide extensive and responsible coverage of the war.

The following sections in this chapter address directly my research questions and consider whether it might be possible to extrapolate from this research a paradigmatic approach helpful for understanding, analysing and investigating the coverage of other difficult civil conflicts where there is limited media access.

To recap, I started out by posing the following three research questions:

- RQ1 What are the key characteristics of reporting about the Syrian civil war?
 - How is the Syrian civil war framed across a diverse range of news agency and media outlets?
 - How does analysis of the selectivity of sources used in media reports reveal the underlying influences shaping news framing?
- RQ2 Who are the media actors relaying information about the conflict and what challenges do they face?
 - How do they contribute to the coverage of the conflict and what is their role?
- RQ3 How do these media actors perceive their identity and how do Western news outlets perceive them?

7.1 - RQ1. Characteristics of reporting about the Syrian War

From the outset of my research, it became clear that one of the main characteristics of reporting about the war was the issue of limited access. Since the beginning of the conflict until its breathtaking one-week denouement in December 2024, it has been difficult for foreign correspondents to access the country and even stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists struggled to gain access to certain areas or sources. This was mainly due to the strict policies adopted by the Syrian government, but also to the fact that the Syrian population was basically divided between those supporting the revolution and those supporting the Syrian government. International news outlets interested in covering the war usually relied on the material provided by stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters supporting the Coalition, who have been keener to work with foreign journalists, presumably because they had the possibility to support and further their cause. While their counterparts, due to the government's strict control policy, were not allowed to work with foreign media. International news organisations had to accept a trade-off between local content and potential bias, mainly due to partisanship, activism and propaganda, as many of the Syrian media actors were directly involved in the conflict supporting the Coalition. On one hand, the contribution of media actors could bring immediacy, authenticity and realism⁸⁸ to the news stories, on the other hand, their contribution needed to be carefully verified before being published, in order to limit the gulf between Western news standards and the material provided by activists. This particular aspect highlights the tensions present in the journalistic field between transformation and the resistance to change of conservative agents (Bourdieu, 1993), as well as their effort to find a way to collaborate and enrich each other's work.

Therefore, international media outlets had to go through an in-depth gate-keeping⁸⁹ and verification process to extract material that was suitable for their standards. In fact, as most of the sources were activists, international news organisations tried to balance their coverage of the war by relying on élite sources from the other warring side which were easily verifiable. But using Syrian government statements and public declarations to counterbalance the information provided by the Syrian contributors did not always work.⁹⁰ The material provided by citizen journalists, stringers and local reporters

⁸⁸ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, (Ibrahim, 2014), pp. 22-23

⁸⁹ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, (Bruns, 2005), pp. 47-49

⁹⁰ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 207-208

amplified alternative voices, offering a more authentic sense of reality⁹¹, also due to coverage through social media. In fact, news outlets used material from both sides of the conflict, but that from the Coalition side appeared to be more prominent because it seemed to be more genuine (coming from eye witnesses on the ground rather than a government spokesman). As stated by Benson and Neveu (2005), new agents trying to access the journalistic field usually try to establish themselves by marking a difference with those already in the field, adopting new approaches.

The bias is unintended and stems from the nature of the content despite attempts at balance. This situation led to a continual struggle, for international news agencies, to cut through propaganda and partisanship, either conscious or unconscious, to provide stories and information about the situation in Syria.

International news outlets tried to bridge this gap by providing training, equipment and basic knowledge of the journalistic standards required to the Syrian media actors. Even Syrian diaspora journalists and media actors still based in Syria started training programmes in order to educate both their correspondents and sources. The development and increase of press offices and media centres which tried to gather and organise the work of the Syrian media actors was also key for news outlets, as they could more easily access the network of Syrian contributors working on the ground. At first, this process could be identified as a classic colonisation of the news agenda, with international news outlets trying to impose Western style hegemonic journalistic values on a far-away conflict. However, the continuous interaction and cooperation between international news outlets and Syrian media actors developed into a more flexible cooperation.

News outlets started to adapt to the way local media actors covered the conflict⁹², while the media actors started to embrace the basic standards and guidelines required by the news organisations, leading to a sort of compromise between the work provided by interlopers and the rules set by the doxa. This actually allowed Syrian media actors to sometimes access the journalistic field⁹³, whose boundaries have become more shifting and fluid. However, as emerged in the thematic analysis, the Syrian contributors were

⁹¹ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, (Tilley and Cokely, 2008), pp. 21-23

⁹² Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, (Konieczna, Hatcher and Moore, 2018), pp. 31-33

⁹³ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, (Bourdieu, 1993), pp. 28-31

still not recognised as journalists⁹⁴. According to Eldridge (2018), interlopers seek recognition as journalists from within the field, displaying new forms of journalistic endeavour to claim their journalistic identity. At the same time, the journalistic field is continuously changing and adapting to new scenarios. Another main characteristic that emerged was that the conflict was reported using different kinds of journalism, including journalism of attachment, peace journalism, advocacy journalism and embedded journalism⁹⁵. These kinds of journalism emerged in the stories analysed in the news framing analysis chapter⁹⁶ and in the data gathered during the interviews⁹⁷. This was mainly due to the different approaches to reporting adopted by Syrian media actors working on the ground, as well as to the situations they found themselves in. Their involvement in the war, as well as their activism, led them to adopt different approaches when reporting specific stories, providing different kinds of journalistic content, usually influenced by partisanship⁹⁸.

In summary therefore, I found from my study that the Syrian conflict was characterised by limited access, partisanship and verification issues. This led to coverage which had to adopt different angles, not only the Western perspective⁹⁹. This represented both a limitation and an opportunity for the coverage of the war, providing the audience with various angles and frames from which the conflict was reported, including more personal views of the war and the humanitarian crisis. However, elements of activism and propaganda were also often present in the stories, violating normative Western journalistic principles and values. News outlets had therefore to find a compromise between the contribution of media actors on the ground and the standards required by their principles of traditional journalism.

7.2 - RQ2. Media actors and the challenges they had to face

Credibility was therefore the main challenge Syrian media actors had to face in reporting the conflict. Due to partisanship and activism that emerged in their reports along with their direct support of the revolution, they struggled to be accepted as contributors by

⁹⁴ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 210-212

⁹⁵ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, 1.8 Alternative forms of journalism, pp. 34-41

⁹⁶ Ref. Chapter 4 – News framing analysis, pp. 119-179

⁹⁷ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 189-191, p. 204

⁹⁸ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, (Storck, 2014 and Jefferson, 2007), pp. 51-54

⁹⁹ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, 1.8 Alternative forms of journalism p. 37

the international news agencies. Furthermore, their reputation and credibility were easy to destroy¹⁰⁰, due to their activism and their open support towards one of the warring parties. In fact, In the reports I analysed, and through my interview data, it was clear that they were influenced by the principles and ideas of the uprising they supported. This situation created tensions and contradictions between the Syrian media actors and the news agencies interested in their work. They were not recognised as journalists, but their contribution was still key for the coverage of the conflict.

Their ambiguous position, almost in a no-man's land, somewhere between being journalists and being activists, was also a challenge local media actors had to face. Especially at the beginning of the conflict, their contribution to covering the situation in Syria was needed, but not really accepted. As emerged in the thematic analysis,¹⁰¹ some local reporters were not journalists, they started covering the war as a way to support the ideals of the revolution. So, at first their contribution was exploited by news outlets that couldn't access the country, while for the media actors it was a chance to get out news and gain global visibility and, in their eyes, to gain support for the revolution. Then, their contribution evolved in a more professional collaboration, as they started to be paid for their work. Therefore, Syrian media actors who funded independent news agencies or worked for international news outlets had to find a compromise between providing journalistic material and supporting a cause they believed in. In my research I found that three of the Syrian interviewees tried to adapt to journalistic standards and even adopted ethics charters tailored for them¹⁰². Their contribution afforded them access to the journalistic field, without being recognised as journalists. In the interviews I conducted, the majority of the Syrian media actors identified themselves as journalists and had access to the journalistic field¹⁰³ as its shifting and blurred boundaries allowed them to enter the field as a result of the contribution provided. However, the international news agencies did not always recognise their status as professionals along with professional journalists and editors, who still saw them as just contributors. This contradiction therefore became the main challenge for Syrian media actors. Their work was fundamental for the coverage of the conflict, but, at the same time, it was

¹⁰⁰ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, p. 189

¹⁰¹ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 177-179

¹⁰² Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 197-198

¹⁰³ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, (Eldridge, 2018), pp.26-31

influenced by external factors that might have contributed to the partial exclusion of stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters from the journalistic field. This obstacle was partially overcome by providing journalistic training to the media actors and basic and clear guidelines to follow, in order to adapt to the international journalistic standards, the so-called process of normalisation¹⁰⁴ referred to by Eldridge (2018). Normalisation could gradually lead to the acceptance of new agents in the field, without relegating them to the boundaries (Eldridge, 2018). This process that media actors need to undertake is part of their habitus (Bourdieu, 1993), in order to reach a new position in relation to the journalistic field. This highlighted the issue of the evolving relationship between new media actors and traditional media, a phenomenon that has been characterised as a 'hybrid media environment' where the latter struggles to control boundaries, finding themselves forced to redraw them in certain situations¹⁰⁵.

From the thematic analysis of the interviews, it also emerged that Syrian media actors had to face physical and psychological hardships that represented a great challenge for them. The Syrian interviewees highlighted at the beginning that they lacked training and equipment and that they found themselves in a difficult situation of bearing witness and reporting about the destruction of their country and the death and suffering of their own people. One of the interviewees stated, off the record, that he suffered from PTSD disorder. Furthermore, some of the Syrian media actors were actually imprisoned and tortured, like Al Omari¹⁰⁶ who was arrested and spent many years in jail.

Syrian media actors didn't overcome all the challenges they had to face. But, their collaboration with international journalists and news outlets started a gradual process, involving training, co-operation, redacting and tailoring ethics charters and standards, that helped both news outlets and Syrian contributors find a common ground on which they could efficiently work together.

7.4 - RQ 3. Journalistic identity

The research question about journalistic identity was probably the most difficult to answer in my research, due to the diverse range of results. The Syrian interviewees, as already stated, identified themselves as journalists, working according to their own

¹⁰⁴ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, pp.29-31

¹⁰⁵ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, (Chadwick, 2011) pp. 22-23

¹⁰⁶ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 185-186

standards; on the other hand, international journalists and editors I interviewed recognised their key contribution, but still did not identify them as journalists not even those who had trained as journalists or had a background in the media sector. This was due to the lack of independence, clear standards and guidelines in their reporting, the influence of activism and propaganda and to their direct involvement in the conflict.

Even though their cultural and ideological positioning allowed the Syrian actors to access the warzone, provide material otherwise inaccessible to foreign journalists and report about stories from different angles, it also represented an obstacle to their acceptance in the journalistic field. In fact, their interpretation of journalism as an 'act of resistance' and a way to help their country represents a point of tension with the basic journalistic standards adopted by international news outlets. The contribution of Syrian media actors could be accepted, but not their personal views about journalism, as this aspect does not respect the *doxa*¹⁰⁷ of the journalistic field. By gaining experience on the ground and through training, the Syrian media actors could actually be recognised as journalists. But to do this they would have to go through a long process¹⁰⁸. In the case of Syrian media actors, their existence poses a both theoretical and practical challenge, to the professional identity of journalists, and the boundaries of the journalistic field¹⁰⁹. Their insistence on 'belonging' to the field involuntarily fuels a conflict between those traditionally seen as journalists and interlopers seeking recognition¹¹⁰.

My research led me to conclude that the coverage of the Syrian conflict represents a compromise between the traditional way of reporting war and the growing contribution of media actors present on the ground, therefore displaying the initial stages of a process of normalisation

While at the beginning, international news outlets seemed reluctant to accept this, they gradually went along with the process of finding a common ground and collaborating with local media actors as they actually needed their contribution. In fact, international news agencies had the opportunity to constantly work with Syrian media actors, adopting different approaches to work with them, while Syrian media actors were able

¹⁰⁷ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, (Bourdieu, 1993), pp.29-31

¹⁰⁸ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 196-197

¹⁰⁹ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, (Knight and Cook, 2013), p.28

¹¹⁰ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, (Eldridge, 2018), pp.29-31

to co-operate with professional journalists, access training and work according to standards and guidelines. The coverage of the Syrian conflict is characterised by many different stories, reported from various angles, based on the contribution of numerous sources. Therefore, in order to get a complete picture of the conflict the audience has the opportunity to pick information up from a huge number of stories, reported from different perspectives and adopting different frames. The coverage of the war also depends on news outlets' journalistic agendas, their interests in specific topics and themes and their approach to the conflict. As Borga states,¹¹¹ reading and trying to fully understand the Syrian war is almost like composing a mosaic, choosing among different pieces to be assembled to arrive at a final picture.

My research led me to realise that labels such as stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters are perhaps too neat and tidy to describe the role of Syrian media actors and that the scenario is much more complex. The Syrian media actors might therefore be seen as interlopers¹¹² who can both work for news outlets or provide their content directly to the public, continuously entering and exiting the field. Despite the presence of external influences, propaganda, activism and other forms of bias in their coverage of the conflict, reporting about the war was a key part of their habitus, that brought them to a change in their position relative to the journalistic field. This also changed the way these media actors were perceived by other agents already present within the field.

International and Syrian interviewees could not totally agree on the definition of journalistic identity, hence the variations in definition of Syrian media actors and of journalism they proposed. In fact, both media actors and established journalists belonging to the field might both see themselves as part of the journalistic field, but they hardly see and recognise it in the same terms¹¹³. The Syrian media actors presented a mix of different kinds of journalism, including solutions journalism, peace journalism, journalism of attachment, with traits of activism sometimes emerging. International news agencies, such as Reuters usually reject these forms of journalism. However, they resonate more with news outlets such as SNHR or Global Voices, or with the news organisations funded by Syrian diaspora journalists, such as Radio Rozana¹¹⁴. These

¹¹¹ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 194-195

¹¹² Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, (Eldridge, 2018), pp. 29-31

¹¹³ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, (Eldridge, 2018), pp. 29-31

¹¹⁴ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 198-199

factors allowed me to realise that the labels defining journalistic identity and forms of journalism are fluid and differentiated, usually influenced by sudden changes which usually characterise warzones.

7.5 Strengths and weakness of my research

I accessed a large archive of stories published online about the Syrian conflict, therefore I was able to analyse the articles published by the news outlets I selected through both the strands of analysis I chose: news framing analysis and sourcing analysis. I analysed the stories published by five different news outlets which each with a different focus and approached the coverage of the conflict from different angles. In particular, I chose two Syrian media outlets respectively influenced by activism and propaganda, one Western and traditional media outlet and two news outlets focused on the humanitarian theme, whose main contributors were local reporters or citizen journalists. So I was able to compare their approaches and their choices about reporting the conflict, as my aim was to obtain a general picture of the conflict's coverage that was as complete as possible. In addition, I was able to interview Syrian stringers, local reporters, citizen journalists, diaspora journalists, as well as international journalists and editors that worked with them. I analysed the data gathered through thematic analysis, enriching the results obtained from the previous analysis and integrating them with qualitative data. The personal stories of the interviewees, along with their lived experience of the conflict, its coverage and the changes occurred, allowed me to analyse more in depth the work of Syrian media actors, how they felt about the work they produced and the process of reporting, including their perception about journalistic identity and their relationship with foreign journalists and media outlets. The insights I gained from the interviews gave me the opportunity not only to analyse the journalistic work of the interviewees, but also to understand the context they found themselves in. I therefore had the opportunity to investigate their motivations to report the Syrian conflict and the challenges they had to face.

However, I only had access to a limited pool of interviewees, as it was difficult to get in touch with them and convince them to participate in my research, as some were reluctant due to potential risk. I was not able to gain access to any interviewees working for the Syrian government's media, or supporting that side. I also had to choose a limited number of news outlets and stories to analyse, mainly due to the large amount of

material about the war that is available. Therefore, I selected five tranches of time from 2018 to 2020, when specific events took place (Syrian Army counteroffensive, Turkish invasion of Northern Syria, Peace talks, rebuilding of the country, focus on humanitarian tragedy etc.) in order to analyse the stories published by the different news outlets and investigate their approach to these themes and compare them. This choice enriched my research and allowed me to analyse different stories published by different news agencies at different points in the conflict, in order to get an idea about the coverage of the war through three years and compare the similarities and changes. However, I am not an Arabic speaker and the English output of the Syrian agencies may have been different in Arabic, for example, Al-Jazeera English is different from Al-Jazeera Arabic¹¹⁵. The interviews were the last part of my work and allowed me to integrate my analysis, while source and framing analysis allowed me to be more informed while conducting the interviews and approach specific themes that were key to my study. By analysing the stories published in specific time tranches and being able to talk directly with Syrian media actors and international journalists that covered the conflict, I was able to obtain a limited but informative picture of the Syrian war, analysed and studied from different perspectives. My research study should therefore be considered as a little piece in the bigger mosaic of research about the coverage of conflict, especially conflicts which are difficult to access.

7.6 Future studies

As stated before, one question is whether it might be possible to extract from this research a model of approach helpful for studying the coverage of difficult civil conflicts where there is limited media access.

It is clear that reporting about conflicts is changing due to various factors, not least technological developments and the key role of social media. While I was working on my project, the wars in Ukraine and then in Gaza broke out. The conflict in Gaza, in particular, has many similarities with the Syrian conflict, especially regarding limited access to the frontline and the work of local reporters. As foreign journalists are not

¹¹⁵ Mohammed A. Satti, 2019, <https://revistas.unav.edu/index.php/communication-and-society/article/view/36535>

Shahira S. Fahmy and Mohammed Al Emat, 2011, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1748048510393656>

Leon Barkho, 2019, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1464884919841797>

allowed access to Gaza by the Israeli government¹¹⁶, local reporters based there are playing a key role, providing content and material to the international news outlets and sharing it on social media. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza can also be defined as 'live wars', as local media actors and citizen journalists continuously share content and material directly from the warzone, along with soldiers who have started to share videos recorded while they are on a mission or they are fighting on the frontline. However, while foreign journalists can easily access Ukraine and report directly from there, in Gaza, local media actors play a key role in reporting the conflict. Without their contribution, it would not be possible to cover the conflict directly on the ground from the war zones or the bombed cities. The characteristics of their reporting and the challenges they are facing might have some contact points and similarities with the ones I studied in my research - local reporters and citizen journalists from Gaza or Lebanon, after the conflict spread beyond Israel and Gaza, are directly caught up in the conflict by dint of living there and having family there. To what extent do Palestinian journalists consciously, or unconsciously, support the Palestinian cause, the Lebanon cause, Hamas or Hezbollah and the call for humanitarian aid, and to what extent do they denounce the actions of Israel? How do Western news outlets cope with these underlying tensions? It is therefore difficult to clearly label local media actors working in areas of conflict where the situation is challenging and in continuous change. As media actors are part of this scenario, their identity, perception and way of reporting is fluid and also constantly changing depending on what is happening on the ground and in order to quickly adapt to new scenarios. This also causes a constant change in the way their journalistic identity is perceived by themselves and by other agents belonging to the journalistic field. In a conflict environment, where the need for verifiable news by news outlets is constantly growing, the boundaries of the journalistic field become more blurred and fluid, allowing new agents to enter the field, overcoming the resistance of conservative agents. As stated by Zelizer (1993), journalists are members of an 'interpretive community, one united by its shared discourse and collective interpretations of key public events'. In this specific situation, media actors become a key part of that community, taking part in a process of mutual adaptation and change,

¹¹⁶ <https://cpj.org/2024/07/media-organisations-urge-israel-to-open-access-to-gaza/>

which is an essential part of the journalistic field, defined as heteronomous by Bourdieu (1993).

Although the research model I used for my study has already been used in this field of research, I decided to adopt this approach, since it can help highlight the fluidity that characterises the work and the identity of local media actors, especially in challenging conflict environment. My research project could potentially be used as a platform on which to build future models for the analysis and study of coverage of conflicts characterised by limited access and focused on the key contributions of local media actors in reporting about the events that are taking place. From the results and data gathered in my research study I therefore developed an inventory of the factors that could provide a useful approach to studying news coverage of a scenario similar to that in Syria.

7.7 Inventory

Is there free access to the area?

Who are those relaying information on the ground?

What is their motivation to report on the conflict?

Is partisanship conscious or unconscious in their reporting?

What kind of sources can they access?

Are they operating according to normative Western media values?

Do they consider themselves to be 'journalists'?

Are they considered as 'journalists' by news outlets or Western journalists?

By identifying some of the factors listed above, it would then be possible to approach the study of the coverage of the conflict by using a research model based on the one I chose.

- Selecting a number of news outlets approaching the coverage of the conflict from different angles.
- Identifying news frames emerging from the stories published by different news outlets covering the conflict, through news framing analysis.

- Identifying and analysing the sources selected in the different articles, through sourcing analysis.
- Interviewing journalists, both on the ground and those on the outside using the data gathered and their material

In my research I highlighted that, in this kind of conflict, it is almost impossible to correctly label the forms of journalism that are employed and the journalistic identity of the media actors and contributors reporting on the ground. As the situation on the ground is continuously changing, not only the media actors need to quickly adapt, but also the *doxa* is subject to influences from outside the field by different sets of agents and factors¹¹⁷. However it is possible to track the habitus of these media actors and analyse their path towards being accepted in or rejected from the journalistic field and the conditions needed to justify acceptance. Some of the Syrian media actors I interviewed, such as Mosa¹¹⁸, started as a school headmaster, became an activist and then, when the conflict began, a fixer for Western news agencies. However, when he was not working for any news outlets, he kept sharing content and reporting about the situation in Syria and in the refugee camps in Turkey, acting like a citizen journalist. The coverage of the Syrian war is therefore characterised by its rich and varied nature, but also by a series of tensions and compromises, regarding the journalistic identity of the media actors and contributors reporting about the conflict and the different forms of journalism emerging from their coverage. Fluidity is therefore a key word in my study; and it characterises the boundaries of the journalistic fields, the labels that are used to describe the Syrian media actors and the forms of journalism they adopted while covering the conflict. As stated by Eldridge (2018)¹¹⁹, one of the answers found by the journalistic world to the emergence of media actors entering the field is ‘normalisation,’ intended as evolving in order to map professional journalistic routines onto new journalistic practices, especially in fast paced environments such as war scenarios.

I hope that my study and the research approach employed will prove to be useful to others studying similar conflicts in the future.

¹¹⁷ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, (Bourdieu, 1993), pp. 29

¹¹⁸ Ref. Chapter 5 – Interviews, pp. 177-179

¹¹⁹ Ref. Chapter 1 – Literature review, pp.29-31

It might therefore be possible to build a flexible model, based on both qualitative and quantitative data, gathered from different strands of analysis to illuminate our understanding of difficult-to-access conflicts.

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Appendix A – Pilot study

News Framing analysis is an essential part of my methodological approach to the topic I chose for my PhD project. My goal is to identify the main themes news outlets and media actors focused on when reporting on the Syrian conflict also taking into account different factors that influenced the context in which these media actors operate. In this case, from my general reading and viewing of the news, I anticipated finding these:

- Syrian Coalition angle: greatly influenced by activism, asking for support in its fight to establish itself and being recognised and acknowledged by the international community
- Assad and Syrian government perspective: influenced by government's propaganda, pointing at the war against Syrian Rebels as a conflict against terrorism. Focusing on rebuilding the country and restoring the previous political situation.
- Western perspective about conflicts: it follows the Western journalistic paradigms about objectivity and reporting war, through the work of stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters based in the country. The main focus is about reporting the main event of the war and analysing the approach of the international community to the conflict.

A.1 Literature review – framing

Due to the variety of different media actors involved in reporting the conflict, news framing analysis is important in order to explore the cultural and political content of news frames and understand 'how they draw upon a shared store of social meanings' (Reese in D'Angelo & Kuypers 2010: p. 18). In addition, due to the complexity of the Syrian Conflict and the way it was reported, news framing analysis provides a great contribution in identifying not only the main themes, but also the main political, sociological, activism and geographic influences that might emerge from the content shared by different media actors. This aspect might support my research in finding out the different perspectives of the media actors involved in reporting the Syrian war, describing the way different interests, influences and ideologies manifest themselves – often unconsciously – in the representation of events related to the conflict, highlighting

differences and changes occurred in conflict reporting along with pinning down some of the characteristics of the media actors committed on the field. As previously stated, news framing analysis also might support my research in analysing the way these media actors are influenced by different factors in their reporting activity, describing how different interests (political, humanitarian, military, civilian, government) might manifest themselves – often subconsciously – in reporting different events. Gitlin (1980: p. 303) states that qualitative analysis pursues a level of complexity that ‘does justice to the complexity of media artefacts’.

On the other hand, news framing analysis also poses great challenges. According to Klandermans and Staggenborg (2002: p. 62), the first challenge involves definitions and concepts, as distinctions between news frames frequently are indistinct, while the second challenge involves verification and proof. Other criticism against qualitative framing analysis comes from Tankard (in Reese et al. 2001: p. 98) who observes that ‘this approach makes frame identification a rather subjective process’ as ‘researchers might tend to define frames in a stereotypical or conventional way’. For D’Angelo and Kuypers (2010: p. 37) a qualitative approach can be challenging when definite categories are not immediately obvious and ‘no easy coding scheme into which textual units can be sorted is evident’.

According to De Vreese (2005), there are two main different types of frames: the episodic frame is pertinent only to specific topics or events, while thematic frames can be identified in relation to certain topics (De Vreese 2005: p. 54). The disadvantage of an issue-specific approach says De Vreese (2005), is that it makes “analyses difficult to generalise, compare, and use as empirical evidence for theory building”. At first, I chose to focus on episodic frames, as my project is focused on a specific issue that I intended to analyse, however, by analysing the different themes and topics approached in the coverage the Syrian civil war, I realised generic frames were more evident and easier to pin down. So at first I decided to take into consideration generic frames to use a more deductive approach, it transcends thematic limitations, as stated by De Vreese (2005) and allow to approach a larger range of existing frames from which it is possible to pick up the more pertinent to the study. I therefore focused on a predetermined set of codes drawn from previous research. In this case I chose the study of Neuman, Just and Crigler

(1992: p. 74) who identified five of the most common frames which are present in the media. They are human impact; powerlessness; economics; moral values; and conflict:

- the human impact frame focuses on “descriptions of individuals and groups affected by an issue”;
- the powerlessness frame refers to “the dominance of forces over weak individuals or groups”;
- the economics frame reflects “the preoccupation with profit and loss”;
- the moral values frame refers to “morality and social prescriptions”;
- the conflict frame deals with the news media’s “game interpretation of the political world as an on-going series of contests, each with a new set of winners and losers”

Then I realised that I could use generic frames as a basis on which starting to build my analysis in order to identify more specific frames that would come up by inspecting more in depth the chosen news stories and features. I therefore decided to combine deductive and inductive approach, drawing on both existing frames and codes, but at the same time expanding my research by inserting codes and frames I was able to identify during my analysis.

A.2 Identifying frames to use in the pilot study – methodology

At a first glance, all the five typologies of generic frames identified by Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992: p. 74) could be detected in analysing the Syrian conflict. Therefore starting from an initial set of generic frames I tried to identify more specific frames that could support me in making my analysis more complete and accurate. In fact, I had to take into account cultural, ideological and political frames, which emerges by analysing the way the same theme or topic was treated by different news agencies. In analysing the content of different articles and features published by news agencies I was able to highlight a mixture of inductive and deductive frames which emerged from the material I decided to include in my pilot study. Some of these frames actually met my initial expectations, on the other hand it was interesting to notice some specific frame that emerged in news stories where I wouldn’t have expected to find them. Specific frames might be a great support in a subsequent comparative analysis among the different frames identified in news stories and articles focused on the same topic. These specific

themes also emerge from the material provided by different reporters and they are also related to the journalistic style that was chosen by the reporter to approach a particular topic. It is therefore evident that there is a great amount of general and specific factors that could influence the different news frames emerging from the analysis of a particular topic.

I therefore determined a specific time frame (January 2018 – June 2020), as in these particular range of time the journalistic interest included topics which were actually very different from each other and could help me to build a more complete picture of the conflict, highlighting different shades and angles. While in 2018 and 2019 the main themes approached mainly included conflict among the different factions involved in the war (included terrorist groups), along with managing the refugees crisis, economic and political rebuilding the country, in 2020 the main focus was pointed on the political strategy adopted by the International community to reduce the tensions among the different parties, protect and support the Syrian population in returning to their houses, as well as the intent of the main world powers to extend their influence on Syria.

I decided to draw a sample from it, using a pilot study focused on the main themes treated by different news agencies in January 2018, as it represents the chronological start of the sample period, but also because this month represents a time of transition in the war, so different themes and topics were approached, from the Turkish invasion to the conflict between the Syrian government and the rebels, the political situation in Syria, the rebuilding process of the country, and the reaction of the international community.

- January 2018: in this specific time frame, there was a peak of journalistic interest in the Syrian conflict, mainly due to the military operations launched by the Syrian government in Eastern Goutha which led the Syrian army to regain different villages who were under Rebel's control. In addition at the end of January, the Turkish army started a series of military operation against the Kurdish forces in order to capture Afrin. In this time frame the Syrian government was also committed in the rebuilding of the country. Refugees were able to return to their homes and the government started to rebuild Syrian economy and international relations, destroyed by years of war.

In order to analyse the main themes approached by reporters in this month, I then decided to identify five different news agencies, whose particular frames and angles about the Syrian conflict were influenced by different factors, mainly based on geographical location, journalistic approach, political influence:

- SANA: Official Syrian News agency, according to DW news has a clear agenda and supports Assad's government
- Reuters: Western News agency
- SNHR and Global Voices: Organisations who support local and independent journalism in order to collect stories and insight of the situation in Syria, focusing not only on war and political issues, but also on the humanitarian angle and stories that focus on civilians' daily life in the war zones.
- National Coalition of Syrians: anti-government organization

Table 27. Pilot study - news outlets selected

NEWS AGENCY	SIZE OF THE ORG.	INTERNATIONAL REACH	MAIN FOCUS AND TOPICS
SANA	Main Syrian state-controlled org. linked to the Ministry of information. Available in different languages.	Available all over the world, its website was hosted in Dallas until 2012, now it is hosted in Syria as Due to sanctions related to the Syrian civil war, which make this hosting illegal, the American SoftLayer company was obliged to terminate its hosting responsibilities with SANA.	Syrian and local News, culture, sport, economy, environment and health.
Reuters	International news agency with over 2.500 journalists and 15.000 employees based in 91 different countries.	According to Reuters data: ● 780 TV Broadcasters in 100+ countries ● 2000+ media customers in 120 countries ● 1000+ publishing clients	Finance and international news. Its offer also includes sports, science, technology, environment, health and human interest.
SNHR	Independent human rights organization which is a primary source for many UN agencies, states and research centres	It works with different partners around the world, and its news and data have been cited by many news agencies around the world	Monitoring and documenting human rights violations in Syria.

Global Voices	It is an international, non-profit, multilingual, primarily volunteer community of writers, translators, academics, and human rights activists.	It focuses sharing and translating stories provided by contributors around the world. It also works with media agencies and NGOs.	Reporting and translating stories of people who have not the possibility to be heard.
National Coalition of Syrians	Anti-government organization whose main focus is political.	Mainly national. Its main goal is to overthrow Assad's regime and establish democracy in Syria. It is focused on creating consensus and gain supporters	Mainly Syrian policy, conflict and news about Coalition's international links, relations and achievements.

The Syrian conflict has been one the main topics of the last decade and every aspect of the war was deeply analysed, using different angles and perspectives by different news agencies, journalists and academics. The role played by stringers, citizen journalists and local correspondents was essential to provide a complete picture, however these media actors gradually increased their importance in reporting the war, providing content and material that professional journalists were unable to collect due to the physical dangers of working in the country and the bans imposed by the Syrian government.

Therefore, it is important to analyse the coverage of the different news agencies in this limited period of time comparing their approach to different topics and in doing so detect their own specific frames through news framing analysis.

In January 2018 the peak of journalistic interest regarding the Syrian conflict was mainly based on the attack of the Turkish Army against the Kurds (especially in Afrin) and the fighting going on in Eastern Goutha and Idlib between the government army and the Syrian anti-government forces. However, these main themes were covered in different ways by the organisations analysed, and their main focus was sometimes set on different aspects of these topics.

Table 28. Pilot study - main themes emerging in the different articles analysed

NEWS AGENCY	NR. OF ARTICLES	MAIN THEMES	MINOR THEMES
SANA	198	• Syrian international relations with other world powers • Actions taken by the Government to rebuild the country	• Conflict with Syrian Rebels • Progresses of the Syrian Army

		Humanitarian situation, focusing on refugees returning to their homes, the improvement of civilians life condition	- Turkish attack against Afrin - Refugees abandoning Afrin
Reuters	105	- Reporting the ongoing conflict (especially the Turkish attacks against the Kurds) - International relations and policies of the powers involved in the conflict - Data about casualties, strategy, objectives, positions gained and lost - International and UN reaction to the conflict	- Humanitarian angle - Refugees crisis
SNHR	18	- Humanitarian Crisis - Data about death rates and casualties among civilians	Conflict as a means to conceptualize data collected about human rights violations
Global Voices	8	- Daily life of civilians near the frontline - Stories about people living and surviving the conflict	- Political situation - Rebuilding the country
National Coalition of Syrians	16	- Data about casualties, death rate and conflict from different sources - Humanitarian angle	Conflict

By analysing the material published online by these news agencies I was able to identify three main macro-themes that usually emerged in the stories taken into consideration:

- Conflict
- Political
- Humanitarian

Then I started to look at the different angles from which these themes were approached, trying to identify the frame-category for each feature.

As I chose a deductive approach to the news framing analysis, I took into account the five most common generic frames previously identified by Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992: p. 74) in their studies and using them as a starting point built my own frame package. I therefore tried to identify these generic frames in the different stories

analysed, however, by following this process, I was also able to identify frames that I was not able to insert in the set of generic frames identified by Neuman, Just and Crigler. Even if there were some common points between the initial set of generic frames and the new ones that emerged from my analysis, I decided to focus on the peculiarities of these frames, as they might be more valuable to my study.

According to Van Gorp, this is a typical approach to a framing study. He points out that part of conducting a framing analysis is to react flexibly towards possible changes that occur throughout the study (Van Gorp, 2007). My goal was not only to categorise the frames into a pre-determined set, but also to identify new frames, as each frame provides a viewpoint that can help to understand issues and to identify themes, finding, at the same time, a new starting point or underlining new issues that were not contemplated in the first place. In addition, according to Van Gorp (2009), from the position that there is an underlying meaning structure of news framing analysis, it is possible to turn to reveal hidden structures.

Therefore, I initially based my methodology on a deductive approach, focusing on a pre-determined list, used as a basis that then allowed me to switch to a more inductive approach and build up a specific frame list to identify more specific frames, during the data gathering process.

My frame package includes three more generic frames that emerged using the set identified by Neuman, Just and Crigler as a starting point (human impact frame, the powerless frame and the conflict frame) and three more specific frames:

- Rebuilding frame
- Humanitarian frame (generic)
- Conflict frame (generic)
- International relation frame
- Political and power frame (generic)
- Civilian frame

The humanitarian frame directly originated from the generic human impact frame which is strongly linked to the civilian frame and the Rebuilding frame. However, the civilian frame is characterised by a different focus, that of civilian daily life, while the rebuilding

frame is more linked to the economic rebirth of the country, which also involves safety and stability for Syrian people and refugees.

On the other hand, Political and power frame was identified by using the generic powerless frame as a starting point, however from this basis I also pinned down the international interest frame, focused on the reactions and relations of Syria with the international community, along with the rebuilding frame, which stands on the borderline between a more humanitarian approach and a more political view of the rebuilding process.

Once I had established my frame package I could use it in the news framing analysis process, trying to categorise the different frames that emerged from the articles and news stories taken into analysis.

I also created a Frame matrix and a coding sheet that greatly helped me in the process of identifying the main frames that emerged in every article.

A.3 Frame matrix

Table 29. Pilot study - frame matrix

FRAME	TYPE	DEFINITION	SOURCE	POLICY SOLUTION	MARKERS: LEXICAL CHOICES
CONFLICT	Conflict, fighting involving different sides, focus on strategy, conquest, military moves	Fighting going on in Syria involving different sides who are involved into the war	Turkish invasion, military intervention by Western countries, Rebels fighting and counter-attacking, terrorism.	Different solutions depending on the angle.	Terrorism Invasion Attacks Military victory Rebels Defending/capturing Strongholds Advance Progress Bombarding
HUMANITARIAN	Helping civilians and refugees to get to safety or returning home. Provide assistance to the people trapped in war zones. Report civilians' situation and casualties	Humanitarian tragedy involving civilians, forced to flee their homes, trapped in warzones, killed during military actions	Conflict, bombardments.	Humanitarian intervention programs for managing safe refugees return to Syria, or receiving them in other countries	Refugees Civilians Flee their houses Humanitarian support Return home Needs
REBUILDING	Rebuilding the country politically, economically through plans and strategies. Receiving support and help by foreign countries and organisations	Rebuilding national economy and structure. Receiving help and support from different countries and organization. Rebuilding nation conscience. Safety for civilians.	Country divided by Civil war and foreign interventions and invasions. Lack of safety for civilians. Lack of resources to meet people's basic needs	Support plans and strategies. Supporting refugees get back to their home.	Rebuilding Organisations Economy Plans UN

POWER AND POLITICAL	Political strategies and plans Policy related to the war Propaganda	Political responses regarding country's problems. Strategies adopted by different parties.	Civil war Syrian instability Propaganda Analysis of political strategies	Sources not focusing on solutions but on analysis or propaganda depending on the side they are supporting	Declarations Policy Propaganda Analysis Relations Parties Assad Syrian Army
CIVILIAN	Reporting about civilians and refugees daily lives in warzones or camps.	Stories and news about civilians and people who try to survive the war or had to flee the country	Reporting about conflict from a different angle. Focus on the people caught up in the conflict Requesting for support	Broad picture of the situation in Syria Focus on the victims. Support for people in need	Refugees Civilians Daily life Stories
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS	World powers' positions regarding Syrian war. Relations among them. International conferences regarding policies and strategies regarding the ongoing conflict. Syria relations agreements with different countries. Relation among world powers, Syria and the UN.	World powers policy of intervention. Relations among the countries involved in the war. Peace talks, ceasefires and conferences. Strategies to adopt about dealing with the Syrian issue. Syria's relations with world powers and countries.	Political, economic and military interests in the war. Changes of the international relations among countries involved in the war	Brad picture of the reactions, actions and policies of the international community and Syria.	Ceasefire Meeting Peace talks Conferences International community

This pilot study greatly helped me in deciding and sharpening my research method, but at the same time provided me with the opportunity to test this method on the field and, at the end, to draw my own conclusions about its efficacy.

After some initial tests about the best way to approach news framing analysis, I then started to analyse material from the time frame that I had previously chosen.

A.4 Pilot study – findings and analysis

I primarily tried to identify the main theme of the article from the title, trying to get a first understanding of the topic approached. Then I read through the article analysing the text and looking for markers that could actually help me to decide which frames were at work. I mainly used lexical choices and phrases to identify the frame (as showed above in the frame matrix table and in my coding sheet), however, sometimes there were visual elements that helped me in identifying the frame, such as photos or videos that were included in the news story. In addition, I also focused on the sources of data – when present – and on the choice of the interviewees, in order to pin down the main frames of the different articles.

As shown in my coding sheet, the article's topic is the first element on which my analysis focuses, then I usually started to analyse the sources used to build up the article along with the interviews.

Analysing sourcing and the pattern of sourcing was also a key part in conducting my framing analysis. De Vreese (2005) argues that the frame building process takes place in a continuous interaction between journalists and elites. As stated by Stavitsky and Dvorkin (2007), ideally, journalists would call upon sources from the various sides in proportional 41 numbers and of similar standing, however, source multiplicity and diversity are not often exercised. Sometimes journalists tend to depend more on a group of sources who are already known to them. Gans (1979) stated that while in theory sources could come from any class or group in society, studies show that in practice they usually come from the powerful classes or groups. While such powerful sources do not need to make extra efforts to appear on media, "the powerless must resort to civil disturbance to obtain it." (Gans, 1979). On the other hand, Reese (1990) argues that journalist-source relationship could be seen in a typology of four levels:

- high-power source/high-power media
- high-power source/low-power media
- low-power source/high-power media
- low-power source/low-power media.

Bennett (1990) also notes that media usually relies on elite sources as a media practice and propose the concept of “indexing” which states that voices included in news stories or expressed in editorials reflect the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate. In addition, other non-official sources are voices expressing opinions that are already embraced in the political circles. The remainder of other voices are usually marginalized (Bennett, 1990). On the other hand, thanks to the rise of social media and internet, this situation has gradually changed as ordinary citizens, activists and other (often marginalized) groups connect with journalists and have their voices heard in the mainstream news media (Wallsten, 2011).

In order to conduct my sourcing analysis, the sources I identified in the features and stories were grouped in different categories shown in the table below:

Table 30. Pilot study – sources’ categories and definitions

SOURCE CATEGORY	SOURCE’S DEFINITION
Syrian government Sub-categories: ● Al Assad ● Prime minister ● Foreign ministry ● Government cabinet ● Provinces governors ● Syrian police command	This category mainly includes Syrian government’s spokesmen, official and members of the government, including ministers and leaders
Syrian Coalition Sub-categories: ● SOHR	This category mainly includes Syrian Coalition representatives, fighters and supporters, including people who are fighting on the field and people who are conducting a different type of war by sharing information about the war through different canals (social media, blogs, websites, independent news agencies).

Civilians Sub-categories: • Civilians trapped in cities under siege • Refugees	This category mainly includes Syrian people who directly experiencing the horrors of the war, trying to survive and rebuild their life and country. It also includes refugees and people who fled the country to escape the war.
UN Sub-categories: • UNDP • OCHA • UNHCR • WHO • UNFPA	This category mainly includes UN officials directly involved in the process of ending the Syrian war and provide support and help to the country and its population
Volunteers, non-profit organization members Sub-categories: • SARC • White Helmets • Red Crescent • SNHR	This category mainly includes people who are working to support the Syrian population, refugees, civilians and war victims, providing direct support on the field, but also sharing data and stories about the humanitarian tragedy which afflicted Syrian population.
World powers involved in the war Sub-categories: • Russia • USA • China • Turkey • Iran	This category mainly includes officials and representative of those countries who are both directly and indirectly involved in the conflict for different reasons, supporting different sides (military, strategic, economical etc.)
Syrian war experts, academics and researchers	This category mainly includes those people who studied the course of the conflict and provide insights about their studies, ideas and prediction about the future of the conflict and the country.
Military Sub-categories: • Syrian armed forces • Syrian Coalition army • Kurdish Forces	This category mainly includes soldiers, volunteers and fighters from different sides who were directly involved in combat during the war

International community Sub-categories: • International delegations • Foreign ministries (mainly UK, France, USA and Russia) • Foreign ambassadors	This category mainly includes officials, representatives and politicians of countries who are interested in the course of the Syrian war. Their aim is mainly to stop the war, supporting refugees and help the rebuilding of the country
Other sources Sub-categories: • SNHR	Other sources which are not part of the previous categories identified

It is also important to analyse the sources in a more granular way, taking into consideration the sources' perspectives about the conflict, trying to highlight which side they are explicitly or implicitly supporting. Lexical markers, along with the tone of the stories and the choice of specific sources, are factors that need to be analysed in order to pin down the main perspective of the sources cited in the news stories. On the other hand, the choice of the sources can also be influenced by editorial guidelines, policy, newsroom environment and criteria of the news agency. Therefore, the choice of sources to be cited into different news stories and articles depends on different factors which may include the editorial line followed by the different news agencies. In addition, activism, propaganda, humanitarian, political and economic interests are elements that might influence the choice of sources.

During my first sources analysis in this pilot study, I was able to pin down four macro-categories in relation to sources perspectives:

1. Pro-Syrian government
2. Anti Syrian government
3. Humanitarian
4. Neutral

1. These sources are usually strongly influenced by government propaganda and Syrian political and economic interests. They usually see Syrian Coalition as terrorists trying to destabilize and destroy the country, while they enhance the efforts of the Syrian government in liberating cities previously under Coalition's control, rebuilding the

country and helping civilians returning to their homes. Syrian government officials, spokesmen and military are part of this category, however it is also possible to include officials of foreign countries which are allied with Assad and are supporting its efforts to re-taking control of the country such as Russia. My sample analysis showed that the official Syrian news agency SANA mainly relies on these sources in its news stories.

2. The sources supporting the Syrian Coalition side as well as the officials of the world power such as Turkey (at first) and USA (more implicitly) fall into this category. These sources usually focus on the fight for freedom and report the government crimes against the population, along with condemning the absolutist policy of the regime whose main goal is to regain complete control of the country. The sources collected among the Coalition, including soldiers, civilians and spokesmen are strongly influenced by activism. News outlets such as National Coalition of Syrians, as well as activists publishing content on social media mainly cite these kinds of sources.

3. Humanitarian sources mainly focus on the Syrian population, refugees and civilians living in the war zones. Their main goal is to show the dramatic situation in which civilians find themselves in order to generate a supportive response and provide aid and support from institutions and world powers. Even if the conflict theme lies in the background, their main focus is the humanitarian crisis, on the other hand, they provide data about casualties among civilians, people who left the country, refugees and war crimes perpetrated against the population by different sides fighting in the conflict. However, these data could have an implicit impact on shaping policy, as they especially focus on human rights and crimes against humanity. These sources are the core of the news stories and reports published by UN agencies, Global Voices, ONG organisations and SNHR.

4. So-called “neutral sources” are mainly detected among experts, spokesmen, officials of the international community, UN and other countries looking at the war from a more neutral perspective and not directly involved in it. They usually approach a vast variety of themes, from military strategy, to policy, humanitarian tragedy, refugee policy, economic factors directly linked to the war. They look at the war from a more analytical perspective, trying not to get involved in order to provide a more objective and analytical opinion. Western news agencies usually rely on this kind of sources, in order

to provide a more complete and bigger picture of the conflict which includes all the sides involved and the different relation which link them.

Table 31. Pilot study - sources' perspective - January 2018

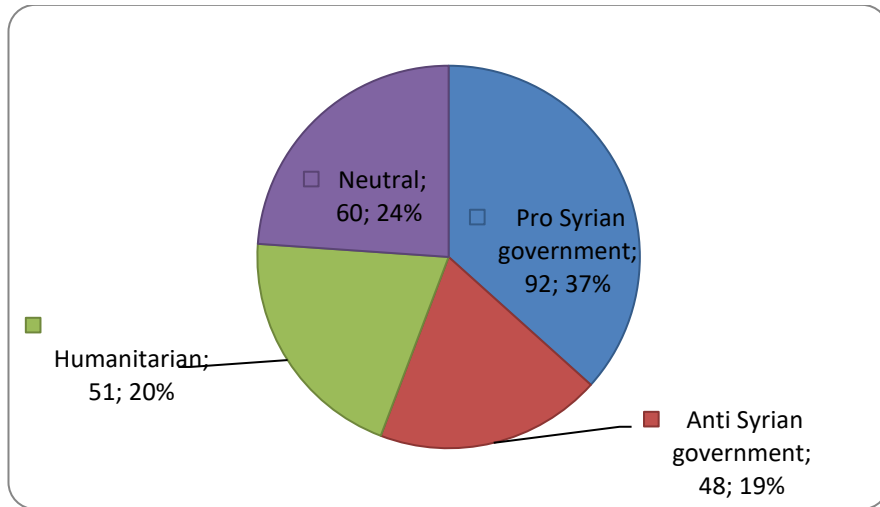


Table 32 . Pilot study – sources- actual numbers - January 2018

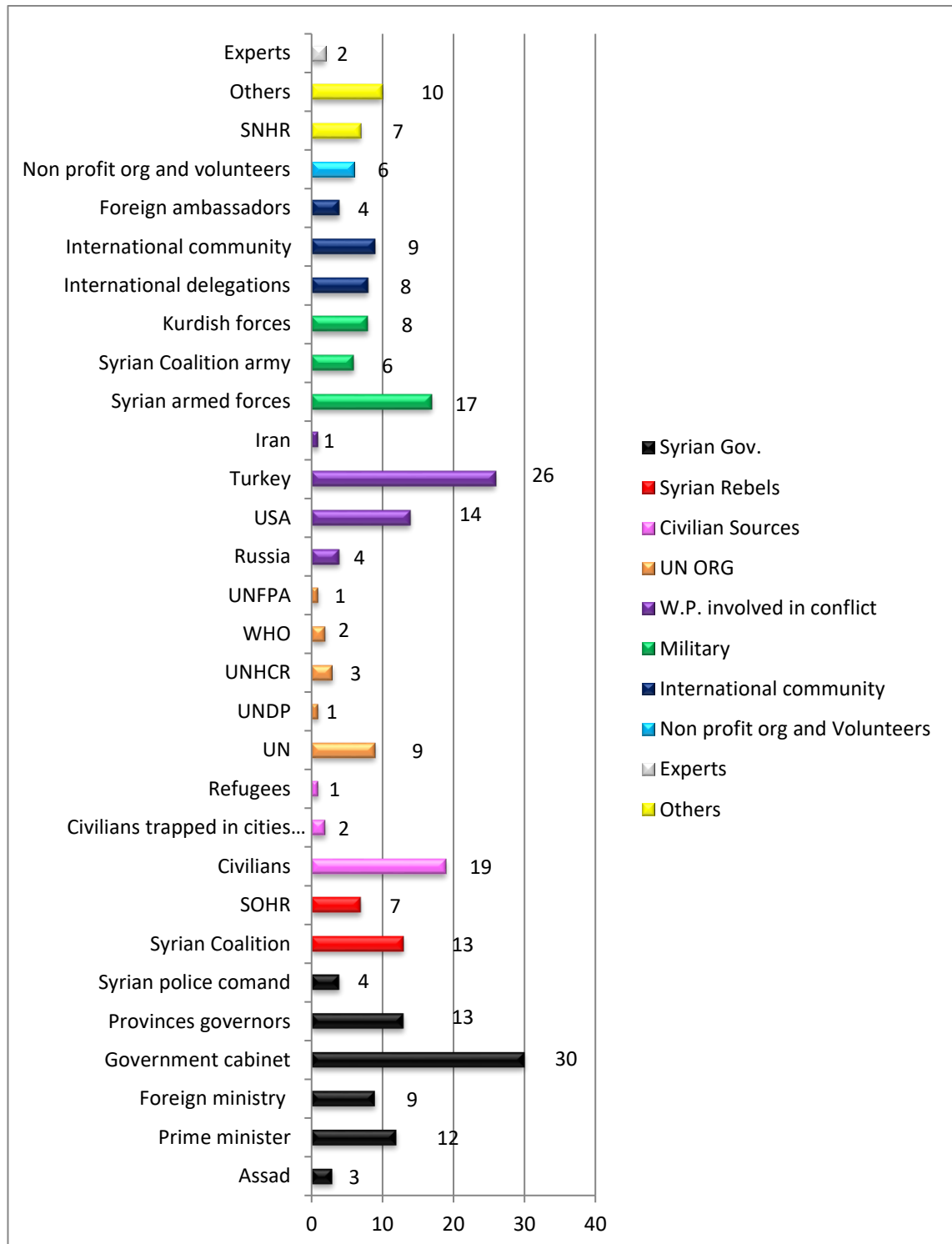
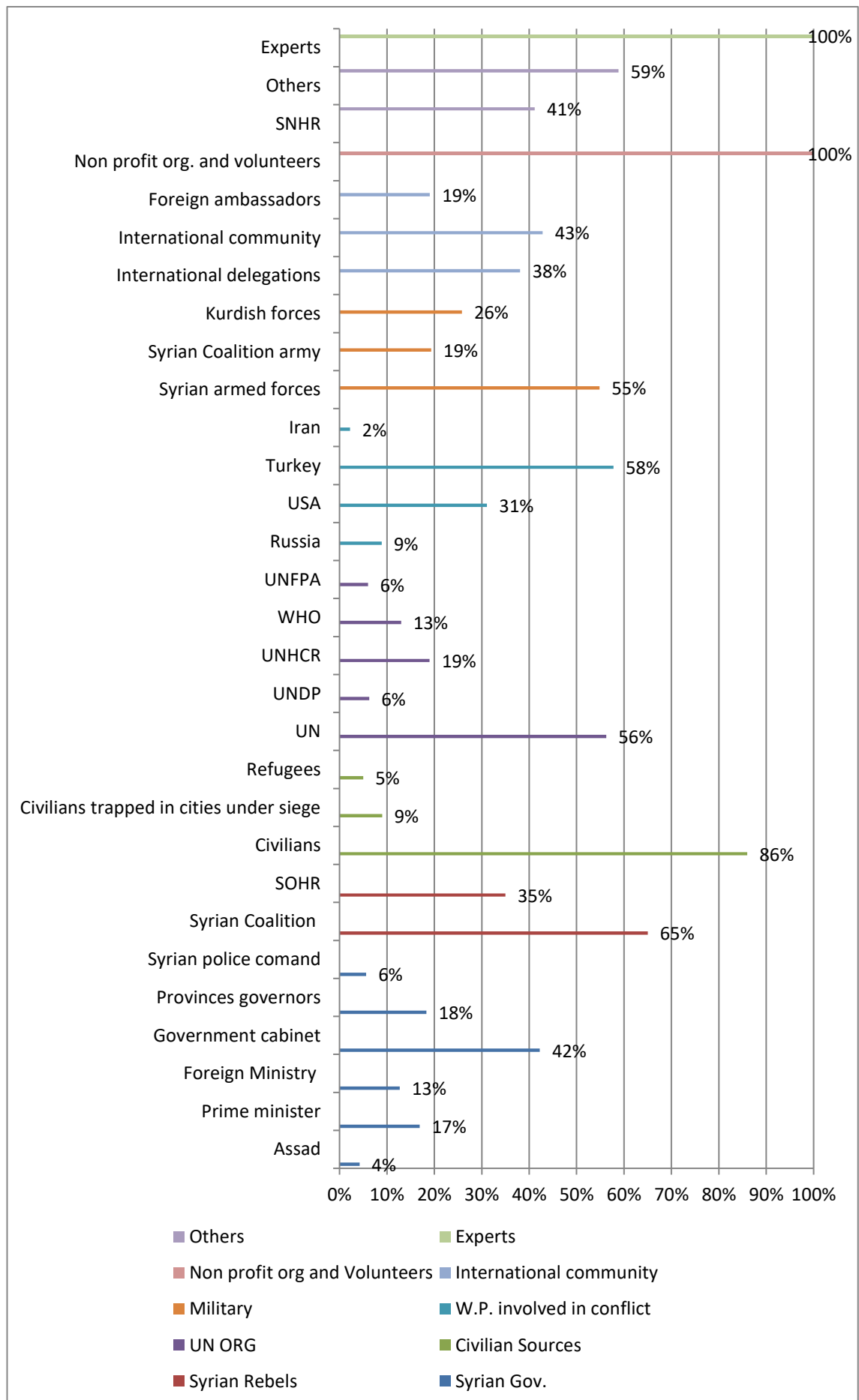


Table 33. Pilot study – sources – percentages - January 2018



By analysing about 200 news stories and articles published in January 2018, I was able to identify the Syrian government as the most prominent source and, in particular the government cabinet formed by the ministers appointed by Assad. The Syrian government is the main source cited by SANA, and almost all the information reported by the Syrian news agency are collected from official government's sources (28%). On the other hand, Reuters was more interested in reporting about the involvement of the main world powers in the conflict. Therefore main world powers officials were the second major source that journalists cited (18%). However, if we include UN and the international community spokesmen and officials, who were focused on mediating among the parties involved in the conflict, stipulating ceasefires and organizing peace – talks the percentage grows to about 24%. In addition, in the end of January 2018, when Turkish forces started the invasion of northern Syria and clashed with Kurdish militia supported by the US, Turkish (president Erdogan in particular) and US officials, became the main sources of the news stories focused on these events. Military was identified as the third main source cited by news organisations (12%), and it was cited by journalists working for different news agencies. On the other hand, civilian sources were rarely used (9%), except by Global Voices, where civilian sources were the core of the stories published.

The choice of the interviewees also plays an important role as their contribution is fundamental in pinning down both the main frame and the angle of the story. In addition, it is helpful to look at the events reported in the story (meetings, fights, battles, conferences) as they provide an insight into the news agency's agenda and main focus. Eventually lexical choices and visual elements included in the article are useful markers that helped me in identifying the main frame more accurately.

In this case the frame matrix along with the coding sheet that I prepared were a great support, but, at the same time I also had the opportunity to improve them thanks to the results that emerged by testing this methodology on the different features and news stories. In this case I had the opportunity to add more specifics and broader content to both the frame matrix and the coding sheet.

As mentioned above, the reconstruction process of the frames packages was both inductive and deductive. As using the generic frame list as a starting point, I was able to detect more specific frames that could provide a better picture of the situation and

could better adapt to my research project. My goal was to categorise every article analysed into one or more frame packages, according to its content and the themes that were approached. Using this method, I was able to draw from the pool of selected articles, the main frames that emerged from the material published by the five different news agencies and organisations taken into account.

A.5 SANA

SANA published a total of 198 features (including photo and video material) about the situation in Syria and the ongoing conflict on its website in January 2018, however, only a few of them were focused on the fighting going on in Idlib. The news agency focused on Syrian international relations especially with Russia, Iran and Lebanon, reporting about the actions taken by the Government in order to stabilize the situation in the country as well as rebuilding its diplomatic relations, economy and social structure after years of war. In addition, Syrian journalists working for SANA also stressed in their reports humanitarian situation in Syria, portraying the improvement of living conditions for civilians and reporting about a great number of refugees that finally had the possibility to return to their houses. At first, the conflict theme was barely approached and the journalists mainly reported about attacks to Syrian cities by so-called 'armed groups' or referring to the authors of these attacks as 'terrorists'. The reporters also wrote about the progresses of the Syrian Arab Army in fighting terrorists and 'armed groups' in order to retake cities or regain strategic positions. Later in January 2018 after the Turkish attacks against Afrin the number of stories about conflict increased.

Table 34. Pilot study - SANA articles

Number of articles (SANA)	Rebuilding frame	Humanitarian frame	Conflict frame	International relations frame	Political and power frame	Civilian frame
198	44	30	36	31	36	21

The main frame that emerges from this general analysis of the journalistic material provided by SANA, is the rebuilding frame, strongly influenced by government's propaganda, interested in highlighting the improvements achieved by the government

in this process. SANA is therefore trying to spread a positive message, focused on the country being rebuilt and regaining its economic and political power. The international relations frames and political power frames are strictly connected and usually they both emerge in the same features, where the main themes approached are about rebuilding international relations (ceasefires, peace talks, economic and trade agreements) and showing the reforms promoted by the government in order to regain stability in the country. The humanitarian frame also plays an important role, linked to the government's policy, as the main topic approached is about the return of the refugees to their houses. On the other hand the conflict frame emerges in the features that usually highlight the victories of the Syrian army, and its struggle against the anti-government forces, which are usually identified as terrorists. The civilian frame lies in the background, as the features about the life of civilians are few (21) if compared to the other data and they are usually published to show the way the government is helping civilians getting back their old life.

A.6 Reuters

By analysing a sample of 105 features published by Reuters on its website about the Syrian conflict and political situation, the journalistic interest is mainly focused on international policy, the report of the ongoing conflict and the humanitarian crisis, according to the Western Journalistic approach in reporting conflicts. The main frames that emerge from this analysis are strongly influenced by Western journalistic culture and political interests in the conflict. The main focus of the news agency divided between reporting the ongoing conflict, especially the Turkish attacks against the Kurds and the International political relations among the world-powers involved in the conflict such as Russia, China, USA, the UK, France and of course Syria and Turkey. The conflict is the main theme reported by journalists, which usually are supported by stringers and citizen journalists in the field, directly reporting from the warzone.

Table 35. Pilot study - Reuters articles

Number of articles (Reuters)	Rebuilding frame	Humanitarian frame	Conflict frame	International relations frame	Political and power frame	Civilian frame
105	1	14	29	37	22	2

The stories analysed report about the chronological development of the conflict, focusing on the military actions and strategies as well as reporting about progresses, military objectives and casualties sustained by the different parties involved in the fighting. The reaction of the UN and the international community to the conflict are also the subject of great interest and is directly connected to the course of the conflict. international policies and relations among the different countries involved in the conflict along with the political strategy adopted by the Syrian government are therefore deeply analysed and reported on, as they are fundamental in order to fully understand the course of the war. The humanitarian part of the conflict is barely reported, as was the case with the refugee's crisis. This particular theme is only approached when related to international policy.

A.7 SNHR and Global Voices

SNHR and Global Voices approach the conflict from a more humanitarian angle, but in different ways.

SNHR is particularly focused on data about the humanitarian crisis that is hitting Syria, reporting about the high death rate among children, along with daily reports about civilian casualties due to the bombing and the attacks against cities and villages from both sides. Events and fact about the course of the conflict are not deeply analysed, however they are approached as secondary themes and have the function of contextualizing the events reported. The main focus of SHNR is on the data of the humanitarian tragedy that is hitting Syria and its people, however the features published are more similar to reports than to news stories. The agency is therefore focused on reporting the need of humanitarian intervention in Syria through data and numbers. This approach might be identified as a sort of Solution Journalism, trying to produce a

response by publishing reports about civilian casualties and push for a humanitarian intervention.

Table 36. Pilot study - SNHR articles

Number of articles	Rebuilding frame	Humanitarian frame	Conflict frame	International relations frame	Political and power frame	Civilian frame
18		16		2		

The approach adopted by Global Voices is very different. The stories are provided by independent reporters, citizen journalists, bloggers and stringers based in the warzone (8 items) and they focus on the daily life of civilians that live in cities under siege or near the frontline. Most of the stories report on their efforts to survive and support their community in difficult times. The humanitarian angle is predominant and the agency is completely focused on the stories told by people who are living the conflict.

This different approach from the one chosen by SNHR, as while the goal might be the same (produce a response to solve the humanitarian crisis), the means chosen to accomplish it are different. It is therefore interesting to compare these two different forms of journalism, taking into account that while Syrian people and their need of support are the main theme, in the stories published by Global Voices the civilian frames predominantly emerge, as the main focus of the features is about the story of these people and how they try to survive in the war zones or refugees camps.

Table 37. Pilot study - Global Voices articles

Number of articles	Rebuilding frame	Humanitarian frame	Conflict frame	International relations frame	Political and power frame	Civilian frame
8		1			1	6

A.8 National Coalition of Syrians (NCS)

One of the most interesting results that emerged from my initial study is about the themes approached by the National Coalition of Syrians. They are not focused on propaganda against the Assad regime or on the fighting against the Government's forces. The news stories published gather information and data from different sources (especially SNHR) and report about casualties sustained by civilians and refugees. Although the humanitarian angle is the main focus, the reporters seem more interested in raising concern in the international community to force them to intervene and stabilize the situation in Syria. This is one of the main examples of the concept of Hybrid Conflict journalism which I mentioned before (Barnard, 2018 – Katz, 2016 – Wall and Zahed, 2015). The news stories are characterised by a mix of elements linked to peace, advocacy, humanitarian and conflict journalism, strongly influenced by activism. The events linked to the conflict lie in the background, as it almost seems that by reporting atrocities of the Assad regime and its allies, the agency's goal is to legitimize Anti-Government ideas and supporting rebels who are fighting for a just cause, serving as subliminal propaganda, trying, at the same time to gain support and help.

Table 38. Pilot study - NCS articles

Number of articles	Rebuilding frame	Humanitarian frame	Conflict frame	International relations frame	Political and power frame	Civilian frame
16		13	1		1	1

Table 39. Pilot study - frames table January 2018

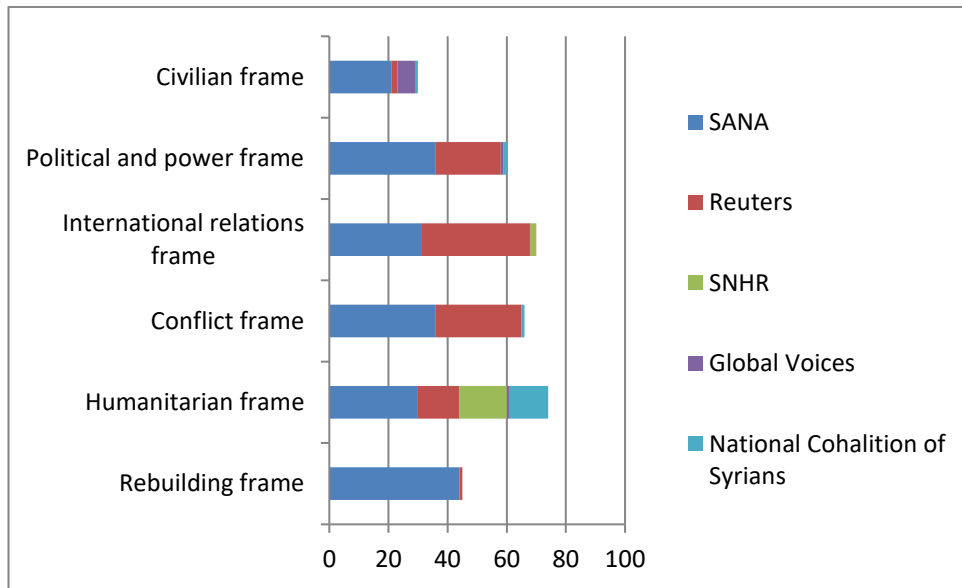
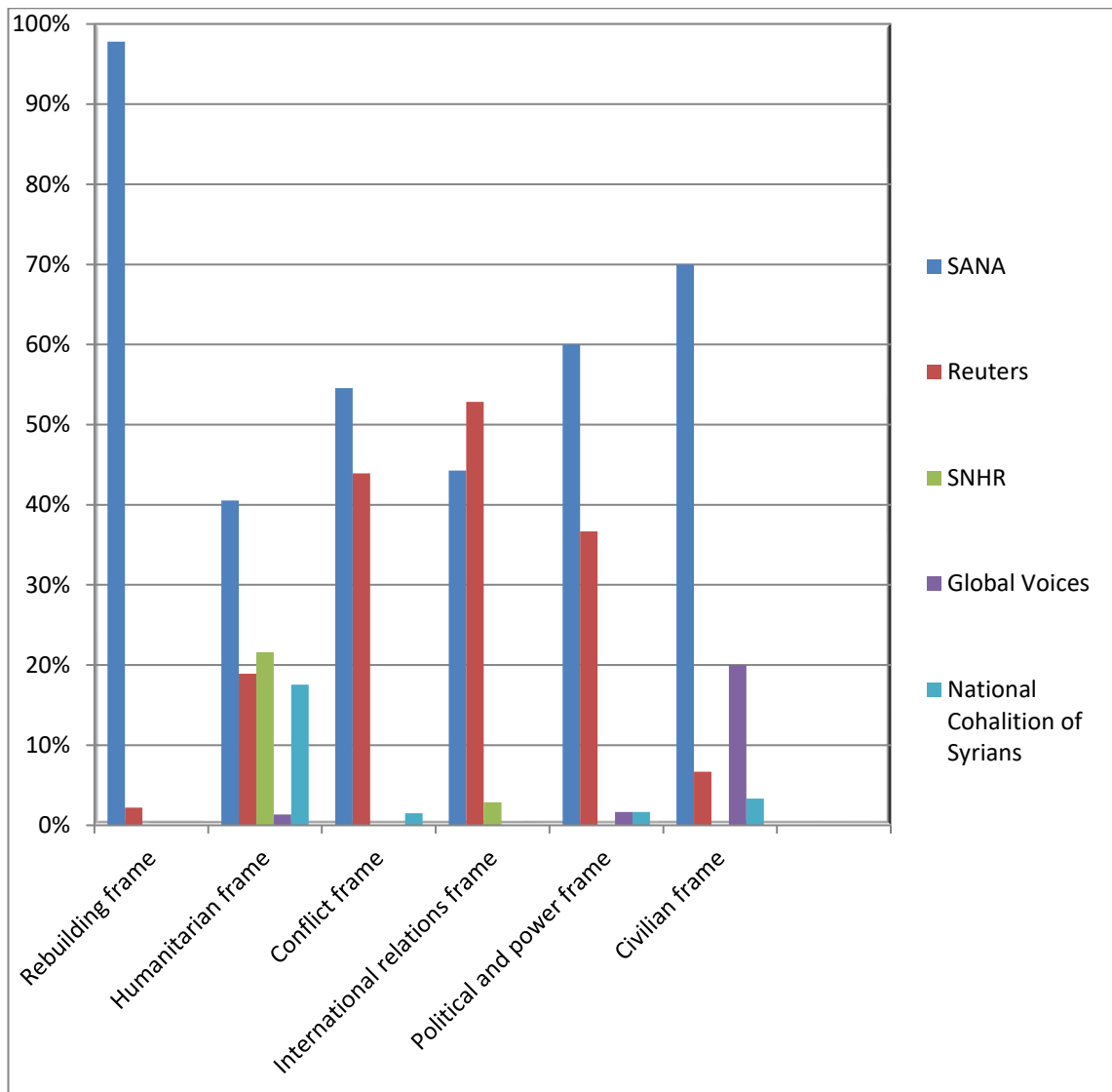


Table 40. Pilot study - frames table January 2018



A.9 Conclusion

News framing analysis aims to provide me with a wider picture about continuities and changes of conflict reporting (RQ 1), focusing on the different news agencies' interests and agendas and their approach to reporting the Syrian conflict. In addition, news framing analysis is designed to provide me with significant insights about the characteristics and the changing role of stringers, local reporters, news producers and citizen journalists covering the Syrian conflict helping me to partly answer my RQ 2.

At the beginning I decided to choose a deductive approach to news framing analysis based on a pre-determined frame list. However, I then switched to a both deductive and inductive approach, using a pre-determined frame list as a basis and then integrating it with a set of more specific frames that emerged from my reading of stories in the pilot sample. In fact, while I was analysing articles and news stories I realised that a pre-determined frame list was limiting me from analysing more specific frames that were emerging from the material taken into consideration. Therefore, I took a different approach to extract the frame I was interested in and then categorise them using the frame matrix and the coding sheet I generated. News framing analysis should also support me in the second step of my methodology based on interviews, as it will integrate the information that I will gather from the interviewees, and it will help me inform my questions to the interviewees. It should also provide me the knowledge needed to face the next steps of my research. On the other hand, the interviews will allow to bring the data to life, through assessing motivation/intent/mitigating factors, giving me the opportunity to also analyse the access and the relationship with different sources.

By approaching my research using this methodology I was able to obtain some early results.

In the news stories I analysed it is possible to pin down different forms of journalism, beyond conflict journalism (advocacy, peace, solution journalism) which contributes to create a wider picture of the conflict, identifying new angles and perspectives. This might be due to the fact the news agencies rely on the work of stringers, citizen journalists and local reporters, covering the conflict on the field. The news content produced is therefore greatly influenced by external factors such as culture (Arab and

Western world), policy, power, propaganda, activism, however it still includes traditional conflict journalism concepts.

These initial findings might represent a starting point to look more deeply into the continuities and the changes of conflict journalism since the Iraqi War (2003) and the role played by stringers, local reporters and citizen journalists in covering the Syrian war.

It is important to clarify that the purpose of this pilot study was to test my methodology in order to understand whether or not it was suitable to my broader investigation.

Working on my pilot study was a fundamental part in my project's development, as I was able not only to practically apply my methods, but also to understand whether the chosen methodological approach would fit with my research project or not.

It was gradual process in which my methodology slowly evolved from a more abstract and theoretical to a more concrete and practical concept, which I was able to directly apply to my study, in order to obtain some early results. At the beginning I was mainly worked on framing analysis, trying to identify and pin down frames. However, by going through this initial process, I realised the actual importance of preparing a coding sheet and a frame matrix and using them to extract actual data to analytically process and providing a wider contribution to my project.

In addition, I was also able to understand how sourcing analysis could really provide more elements to be used in conducting a more in-depth analysis of frames and contents, also giving me the opportunity to highlight the different sources' perspectives about the war. Framing and sourcing analysis will therefore provide me a solid basis for the next step of my methodology, informing the semi-structured interviews I will be conducting, along with supporting me in the choice of the interviewees and the question I will ask them.

The pilot study I conducted allowed me to properly test my methodology and also helped me to process my ideas and practically apply them. I will use framing and sourcing analysis to inspect news stories and articles published in pre-determined range of time, in order to build a strong basis on more analytical data.

Then, I will be able to integrate these data with information and contents extracted from the interviews, combining these two methods I will try to answer my research questions. On the other hand, even if I identified a method that could actually work for my study, I will have to be flexible and ready to adapt my methodology to possible changes that might come up, progressing with my study. However, working on this pilot study and actually writing it down, greatly contributed to the development of my project and helped me realizing on which elements I should focus to progress with my research project and taking further steps forward.

Appendix B – Coding sheet

HUMANITARIAN FRAME	
Reports about people returning to their homes	
Highlights support provided to refugees and civilians	
Reports about life conditions of people trapped in war zones	
Provides data about refugees and people fleeing the country	
Provides data about civilians' casualties	
Interviews of people and civilians who describe their life in war zones or refugees' camps	
Interviews to officials of humanitarian organization involved in the support of civilians (ex. UNHCR, UNDP, WFP)	
Interviews to NGO officials or volunteers helping civilians	
Citation of:	
humanitarian intervention programs	
Refugees support programs	
Aids provided by the government or different org.	
Specific lexical choices:	
Refugees	
Civilians	
Flee their houses	
Humanitarian support	
Return home	
Needs	
Casualties among civilians	
Humanitarian intervention	
Media and visual material	

Photos or videos about refugees	
Photos or videos about civilians trapped in war zones	
Photos or videos about people in need of support	
Photos or videos about people returning home	
CONFLICT FRAME	
Reports about military strategies	
Reports about military operations in Syria conducted by the different parties	
Reports about the direct military intervention of the world powers interested in the conflict	
Provides data regarding casualties	
Interviews to military officials	
Interviews to politicians	
Interviews to conflict experts	
Citation of:	
Events, fighting or battles	
Military invasions	
Military support from other countries	
Specific lexical choices:	
Terrorism	
Invasion	
Attacks	
Military victory	
Defending/ capturing Strongholds	
Rebels	

Progress	
Advance	
Bombarding	
Media and visual material	
Photos or videos about soldiers and military operations	
Photos or videos about bombardments	
Photos or videos about battles and fighting	
Photos or videos about casualties	
Photos or videos about cities and strongholds where military forces are fighting	
REBUILDING FRAME	
Reports about the political, economic and social rebuilding process going on in Syria	
Reports about Rebuilding strategies and policy	
Reports about reconstruction of cities and areas destroyed by the war	
Reports about help and support received by other countries	
Provides data about economic upturn	
Interviews to politicians	
Interviews to Syrian government's officials	
Interviews to experts	
Citation of:	
Meetings	
Presentations and events related to the rebuilding of the country	
Support plans	
Solutions	

Specific lexical choices:	
Rebuilding	
Organisations	
UN	
Plans	
Economy	
Media and visual material	
Photos or videos about people returning home	
Photos or videos about rebuilt cities	
Photos or videos about meetings and conferences	
Photos or videos about international support and aids	
POWER AND POLITICAL FRAME	
Reports about political strategies adopted by the Syrian government	
Reports about policy and war propaganda	
Reports about political responses	
Reports about relations among the different parties involved in the conflict	
Reports about political instability in the country	
Analysis of different political strategies	
Interviews of officials, politicians and members of the Syrian government	
Interviews of experts and academics who studied the Syrian political situations	
Interviews to UN officials	
Interviews to officials and representative of other countries and world powers involved in the war	
Citation of:	

Meetings	
Conferences	
Ceasefires	
Conferences or public speeches	
Specific lexical choices:	
Declarations	
Policy	
Propaganda	
Analysis	
Relations	
Parties	
Syrian Army	
Assad	
Syrian government	
Media and visual material	
Photos or videos about public speeches or conferences	
Photos or videos about meetings	
CIVILIAN FRAME	
Reports about civilians and refugees lives	
Reports about civilians trapped in warzones	
Reports about refugees based in refugees camps	
Reports about refugees who fled the country	
Reports about people who struggle and try to survive in difficult situations	

Interviews to civilians	
Interviews to refugees	
Interviews to volunteers based in the refugees' camps or warzones	
Citation of:	
Events happened in warzones	
Daily life in warzones	
Stories of refugees fleeing the country	
Stories about life in refugees' camps	
Experience in the warzones	
Specific lexical choices:	
Refugees	
Civilians	
Daily life	
Stories	
Experiences	
Media and visual material	
Photos or videos about civilians in warzones or refugees' camps	
Photos or videos about daily life in cities under siege	
Photos or videos about people fleeing the country	
INTERNATIONAL INTEREST FRAME	
Reports about World powers' positions regarding Syrian war	
Reports about international relations among the powers involved in the war	
Reports about International conferences regarding policies and strategies to stop the conflict	

Reports about Syria's relations and agreements with other countries and the international community	
Reports about Syria's relations with world powers and the UN	
Reports about Political, economic and military interests in the war	
Reports about Changes of the international relations among countries involved in the war	
Interviews to politicians	
Interviews to experts and academics	
Interviews to International community officials	
Citation of:	
Meetings and conferences	
International community	
Pacts and agreements	
International relations	
Specific lexical choices:	
Ceasefire	
Meeting	
Peace talks	
Conferences	
International community	
Treaties	
Agreements	
Trade	
Media and visual material	
Photos or videos about peace talks, conferences	

Photos or videos about officials speeches or meetings	

Appendix C – Interview questions

- What are your main sources and why?
- Why did you decide to report about the conflict?
- What were your motivations?
- What was your initial intention?
- How did you prepare yourself?
- Did you follow some specific courses?
- Did you start to work with journalists straight away or did you try to work independently at first?
- In relation to the journalistic world, how do you identify yourself?
- How do you cover a story? Do you report in the field or are you working at a desk/in a newsroom with colleagues or partners providing you information? Is it a mix of both?
- How did you decide who to work with?
- How do you select your sources?
- How do you keep in touch with your sources?
- How easy is it to access your sources?
- Are there sources that you would like to access? If so, why is it difficult to do so?
- How do you select a story which is worthy to be reported?
- Do you usually report them first hand or do you rely on secondary sources?
- How do you select secondary sources?
- How do you verify the truthfulness of a story?
- Where do you usually publish your stories? Do you have a blog, a social media account?
- Do you work with Western/Arab News agencies? How do you provide them with the content you create?
- How do you engage with editorial guidelines and protocols?
- Why did you decided to report about the war?
- What do you think about objectivity?
- What do you think about frames?
- Do you think there is such a thing as a neutral frame?

- Do you think it is possible to pin down a frame in your stories? If yes, is it neutral or not?
- I suppose your main goal is to inform people through your stories, however, do you think you also might influence them?
- Do you think that the language you use in your stories might influence the reader in some way?
- Do you have guidelines you follow about the language you use?
- How do you select the headlines? How do you adapt headlines to the different stories?

Appendix D – Tables

Table 41. News outlets selected

NEWS OUTLETS	SIZE OF THE ORG.	INTERNATIONAL REACH	MAIN FOCUS AND TOPICS
SANA	Main Syrian state-controlled. linked to the Ministry of information. Available in different languages.	Available all over the world, its website was hosted in Dallas until 2012, now it is hosted in Syria as due to sanctions related to the Syrian civil war, which make this hosting illegal, the American SoftLayer company was obliged to terminate its hosting responsibilities with SANA.	Syrian and local news, culture, sport, economy, environment and health.
Reuters	International news agency with over 2.500 journalists and 15.000 employees based in 91 different countries.	According to Reuters data: 780 TV Broadcasters in 100+ countries 2000+ media customers in 120 countries 1000+ publishing clients	Finance and international news. Its offer also includes sports, science, technology, environment, health and human interest.
SNHR	Independent human rights organisation which is a primary source for many UN agencies, states and research centres	It works with different partners around the world, and its news and data have been cited by many news agencies around the world	Monitoring and documenting human rights violations in Syria.
Global Voices	It is an international, non-profit, multilingual, primarily volunteer community of writers, translators, academics, and human rights activists.	Focused on sharing and translating stories provided by contributors around the world. It also works with media agencies and NGOs.	Reporting, translating stories of people who have not the possibility to be heard.
National Coalition of Syrians	Anti-government organisation whose main focus is political.	Mainly national. Its main goal is to overthrow Assad's regime and establish democracy in Syria. It is focused on creating consensus and gain supporters	Mainly Syrian policy, conflict and news about Coalition's international links, relations, achievements.

Table 42. List of interviewees

INTERVIEWEE	ROLE	NEWS OUTLETS
Francesca Borri	Italian freelancer and correspondent	She works for various international and Italian news outlets and newspapers. She covers the Middle-East, especially Palestine, Iraq and Syria. She was one of the last Western reporters to leave Syria.
Rami Jarrah	Former Syrian stringer and editor	He founded his own news outlets and radio station near the border with Jordan, he reported about the conflict and organised journalism and war reporting courses to train local reporters and stringers. He was forced to leave Syria to avoid being jailed by the Syrian government
Sarah Kassim	Syrian local reporter	She works as local reporter in Northwest Syria and Idlib
Tracey Shelton	Australian journalist and editor	She works for ABC and covered the Syrian conflict in Aleppo.
Lina Chawaf	Syrian journalist and founder of Radio Rozana	She worked for a Syrian radio station, then she self-imposed exile and founded Radio Rozana to broadcast citizen journalism from Syria and built a net of stringers and reporters operating on the ground
Cristiano Tinazzi	Italian freelance	He has worked as freelance and correspondent for different media outlets including RSI and Rai Tre, covering the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Libya, The Syrian War and the conflict in Ukraine.
Dahlia Kholaf	Editorial director at EGAB	She reported about the Middle East for almost 15 years, she also worked as a regional editor for Global Voices.
Ugo Lucio Borgia	Italian photojournalist and writer	He has published in-depth reportage worldwide covering, among others, the Arab Spring, the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Somalia, Libya, Syria, South Sudan, Mali, Afghanistan, Philippines, religious clashes in northern Lebanon, the Eritrea dictatorship, the Ukraine war, the Iraq war against the Islamic State.
Mahmoud Mosa	Syrian stringer and fixer	He worked for numerous Western news outlets, operating as a fixer for foreign journalists and as a stringer.
Mansour Al-Omari	Syrian journalist	He worked as a journalist in Syria before being arrested and tortured by the Syrian government. He is a Syrian human rights defender and legal researcher. Omari works with international and Syrian human rights organisations to hold the perpetrators of international crimes in Syria accountable.

Appendix E – Tables of numerical data

Table 43. SANA – number of articles for each time tranche

SANA	Number of articles	Rebuilding frame	Humanitarian frame	Conflict frame	International relations frame	Political and power frame	Civilian frame
January 2018	198	44	30	36	31	36	21
March 2019	77	12	16	13	21	12	3
September 2019	70	27	12	12	8	8	3
January 2020	81 1 (Health Frame)	6	10	29	16	11	9

Table 44. Reuters – number of articles for each time tranche

REUTERS	Number of articles	Rebuilding frame	Humanitarian frame	Conflict frame	International relations frame	Political and power frame	Civilian frame
January 2018	105	1	14	29	37	22	2
March 2019	87	4	10	40	15	10	8
September 2019	40	1	4	11	16	3	5
January 2020	36	1	10	14	3	7	1

Table 45. SNHR – number of articles for each time tranche

SNHR	Number of articles	Rebuilding frame	Humanitarian frame	Conflict frame	International relations frame	Political and power frame	Civilian frame
January 2018	18	0	16	0	2	0	0
March 2019	166	2	160	1	0	0	3
September 2019	99	0	40	5	0	0	54
January 2020	150	0	118	0	0	0	32

Table 46. Global Voices – number of articles for each time tranche

GLOBAL VOICES	Number of articles	Rebuilding frame	Humanitarian frame	Conflict frame	International relations frame	Political and power frame	Civilian frame
January 2018	8	0	1	0	0	1	6
March 2019	3	0	0	0	0	2	1
September 2019	3	0	0	1	0	0	2
January 2020	3	0	2	0	0	0	1

Table 47. National Coalition of Syrians – number of articles for each time tranche

NATIONAL COALITION OF SYRIANS	Number of articles	Rebuilding frame	Humanitarian frame	Conflict frame	International relations frame	Political and power frame	Civilian frame
January 2018	16	0	13	1	0	1	1
March 2019	74	2	32	2	11	15	12
September 2019	92	5	21	12	21	30	3
January 2020	70	2	30	6	10	15	7

Table 48. January 2018 – Sources – actual numbers

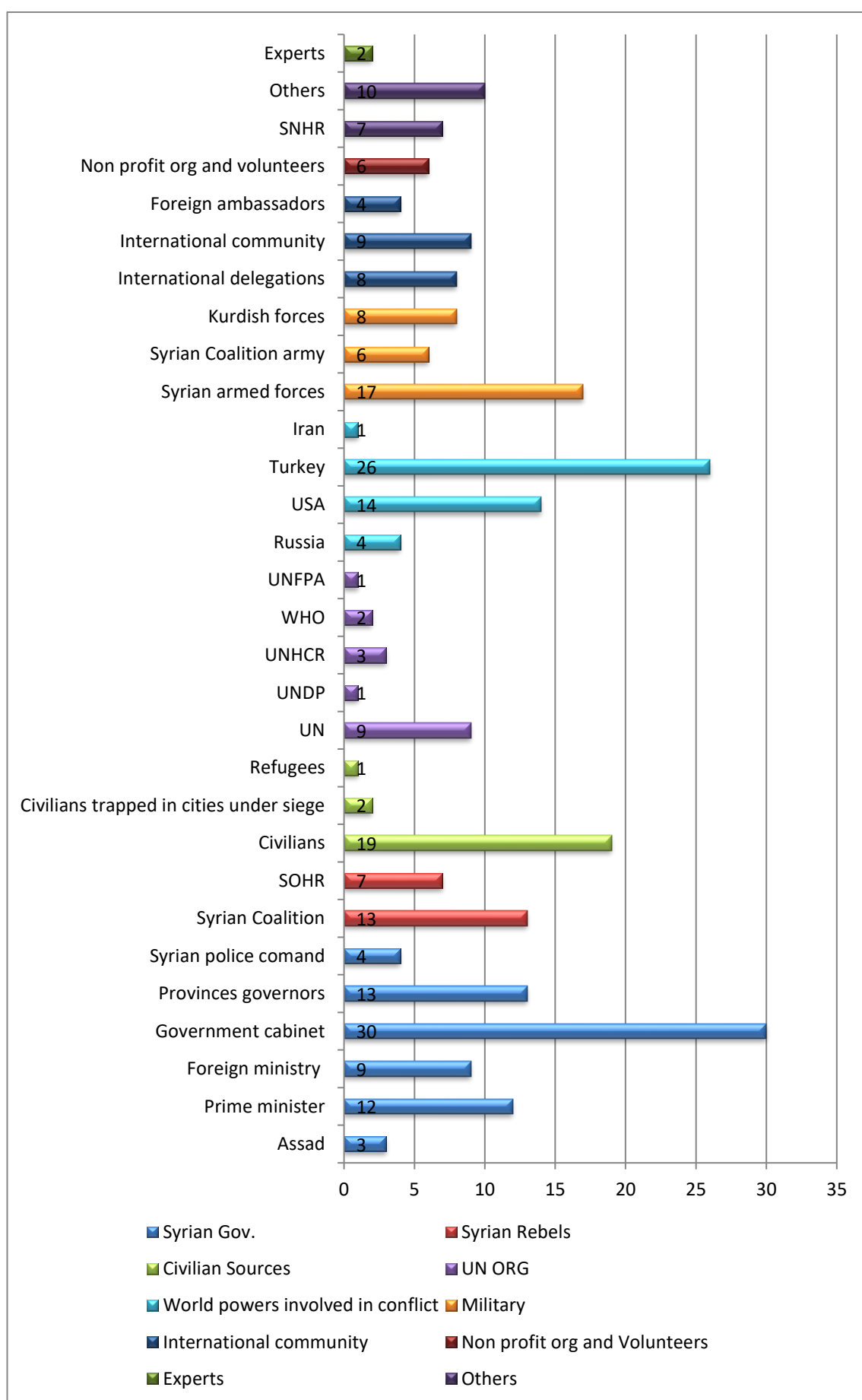


Table 49. January 2018 – Sources – percentages

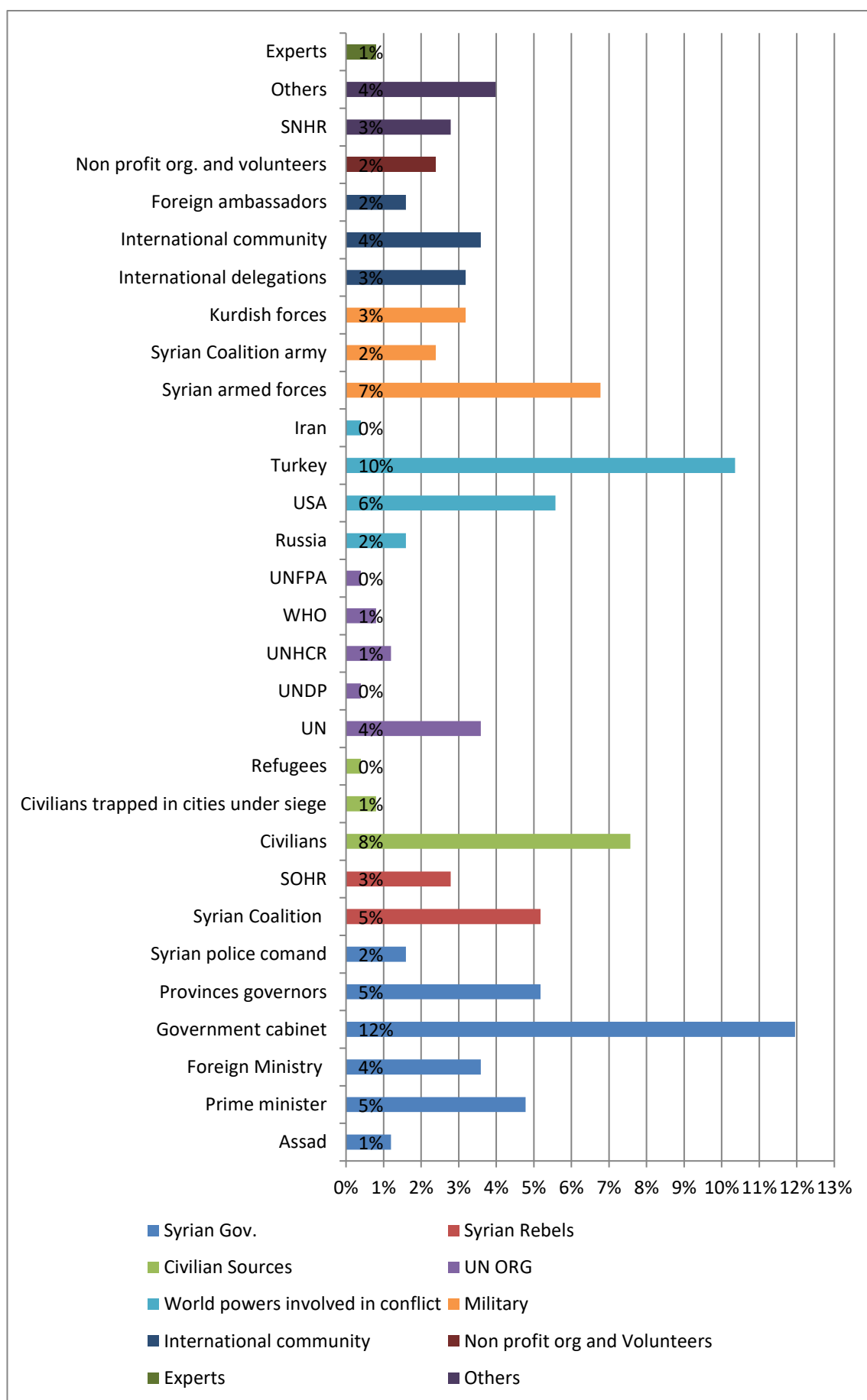


Table 50. March 2019 – Sources - actual numbers

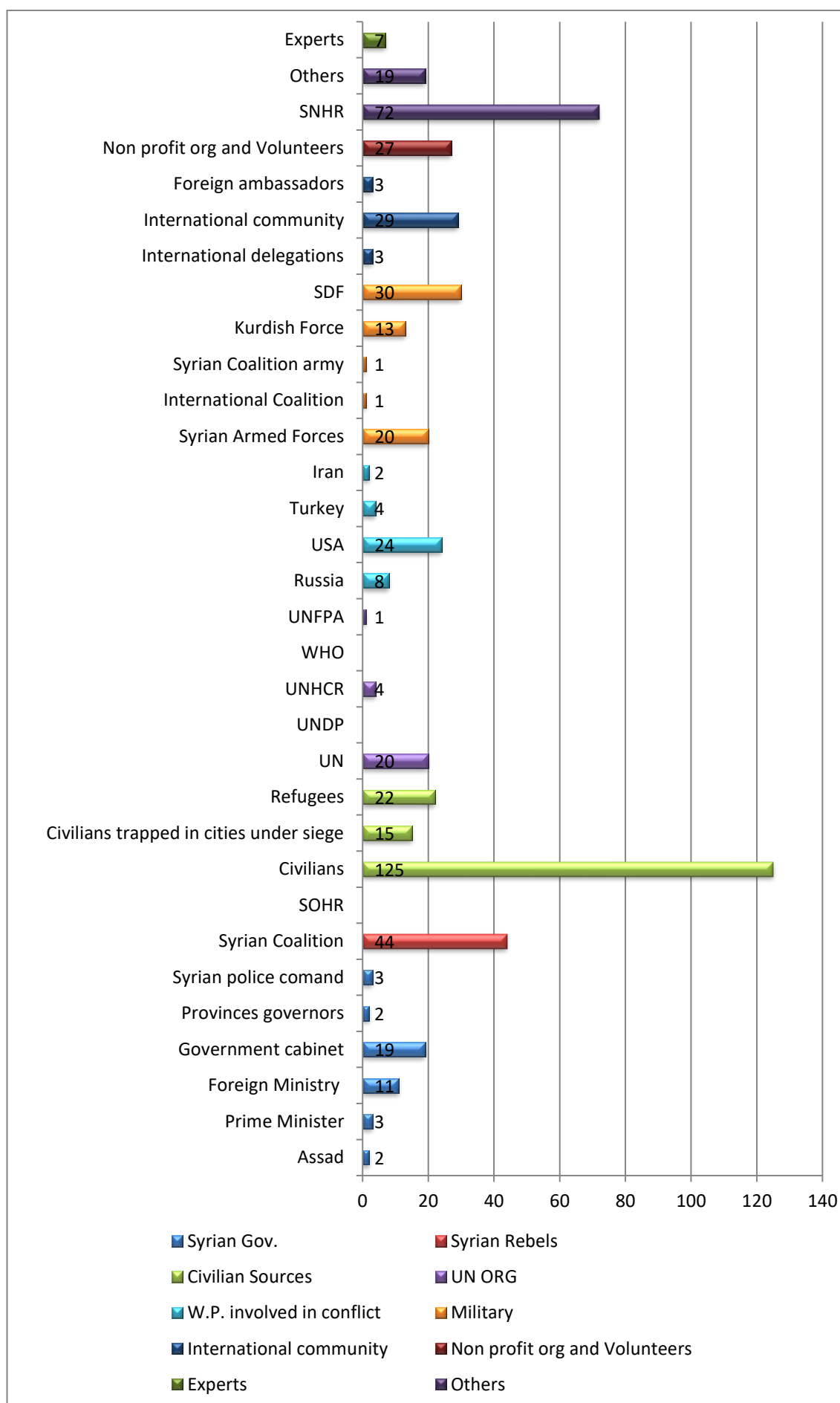


Table 51. March 2019 – Sources - percentages

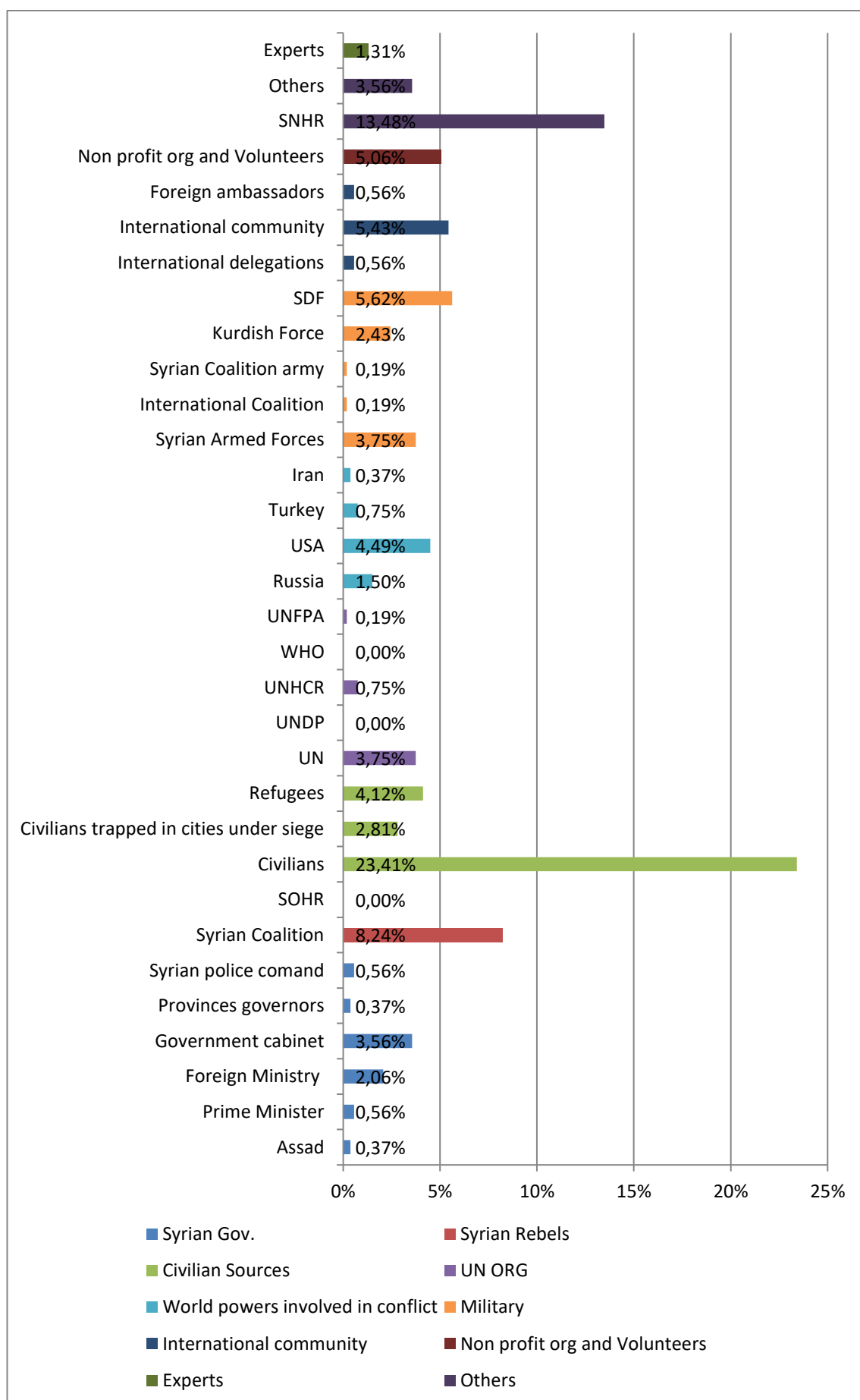


Table 52. September 2019 – Sources - actual numbers

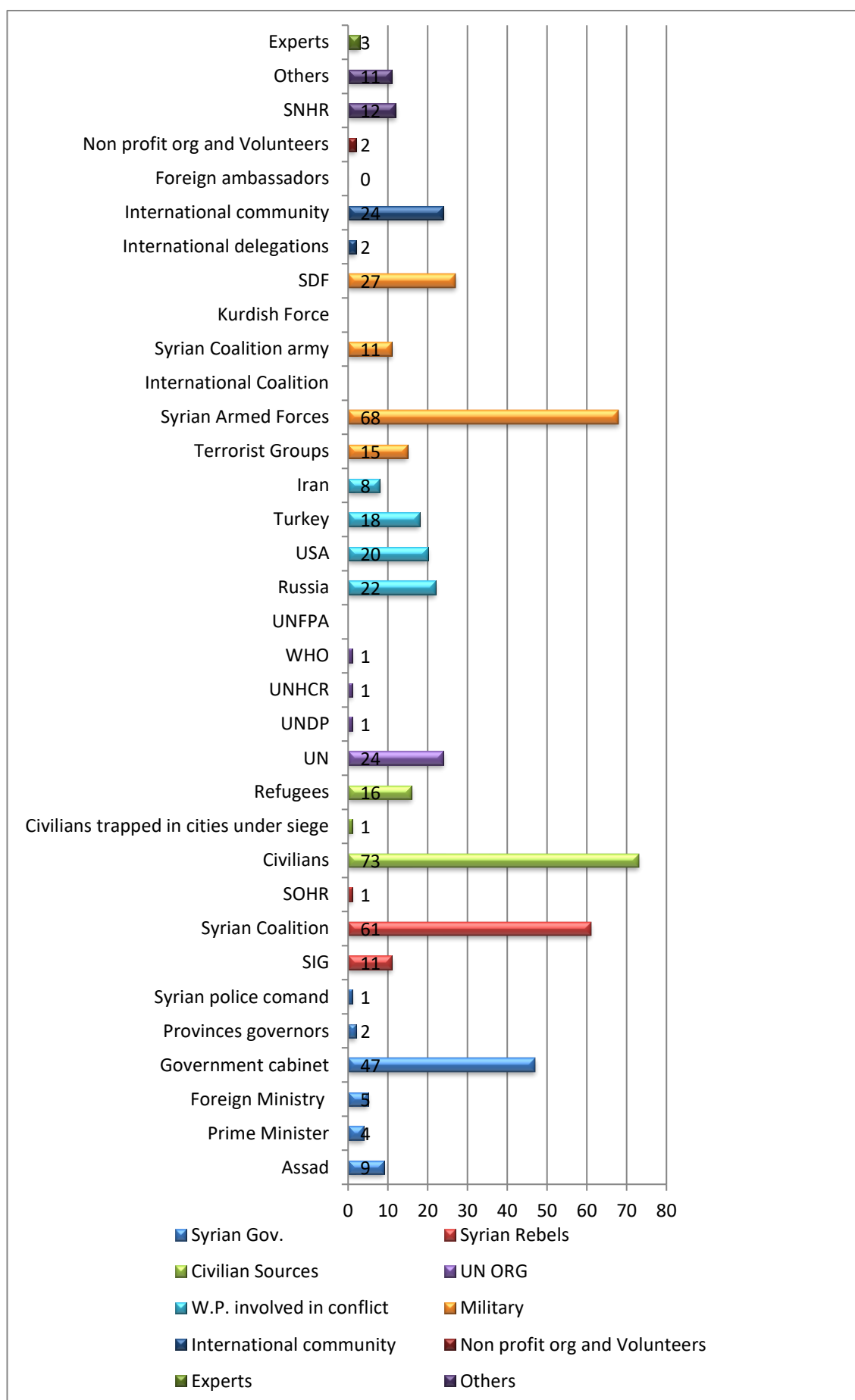


Table 53. September 2019 – Sources – percentages

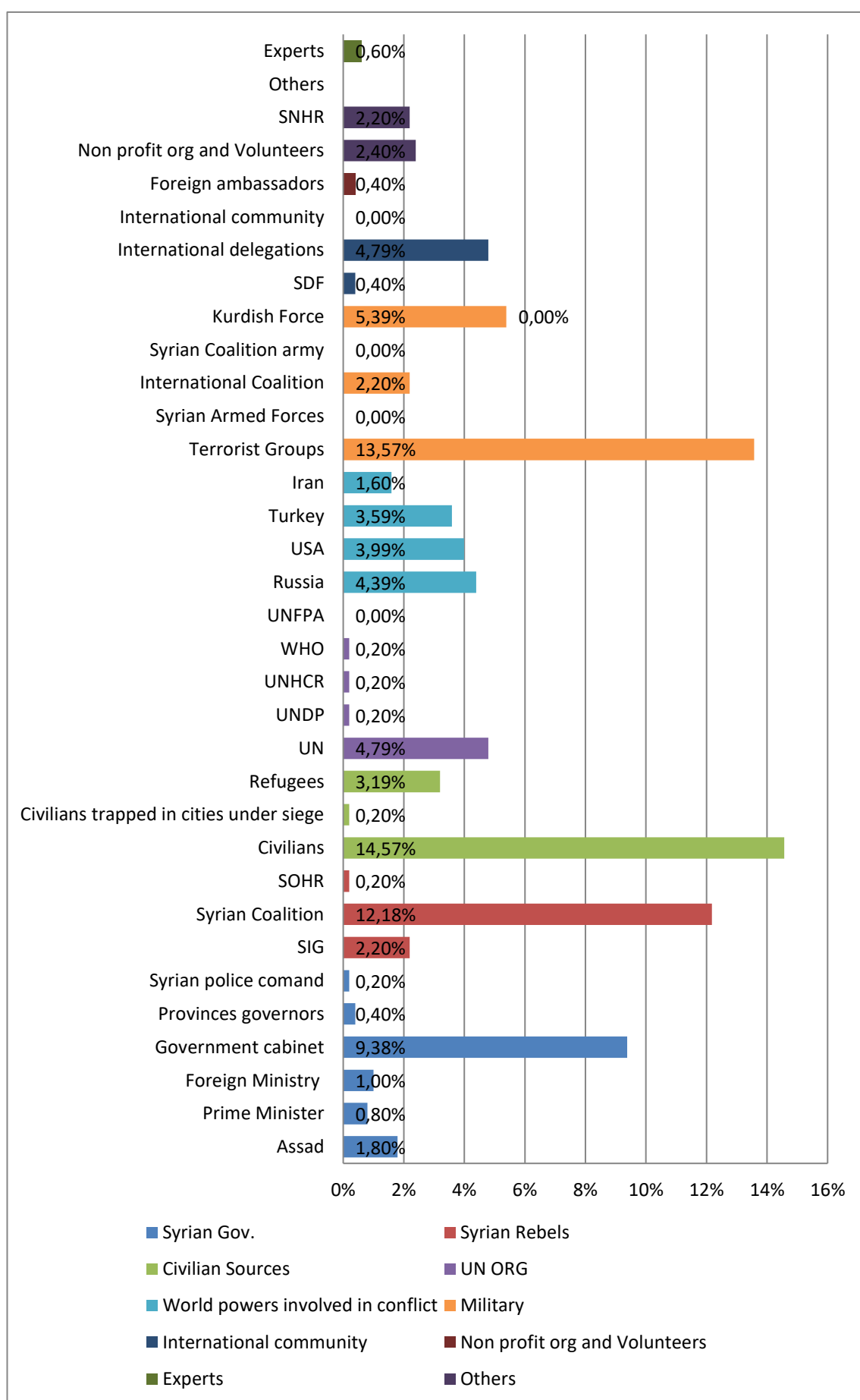


Table 54. January 2020 – Sources – actual numbers

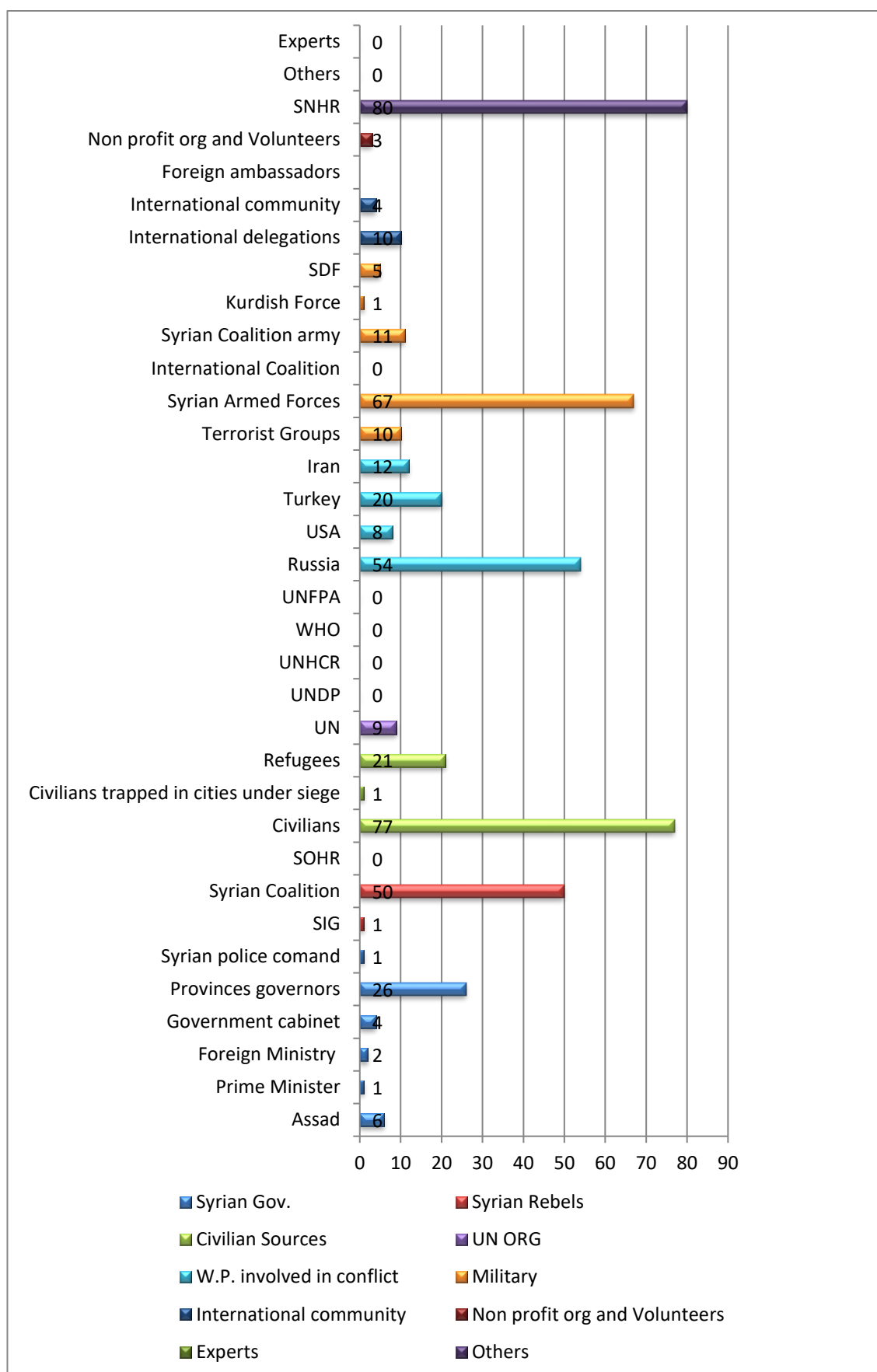
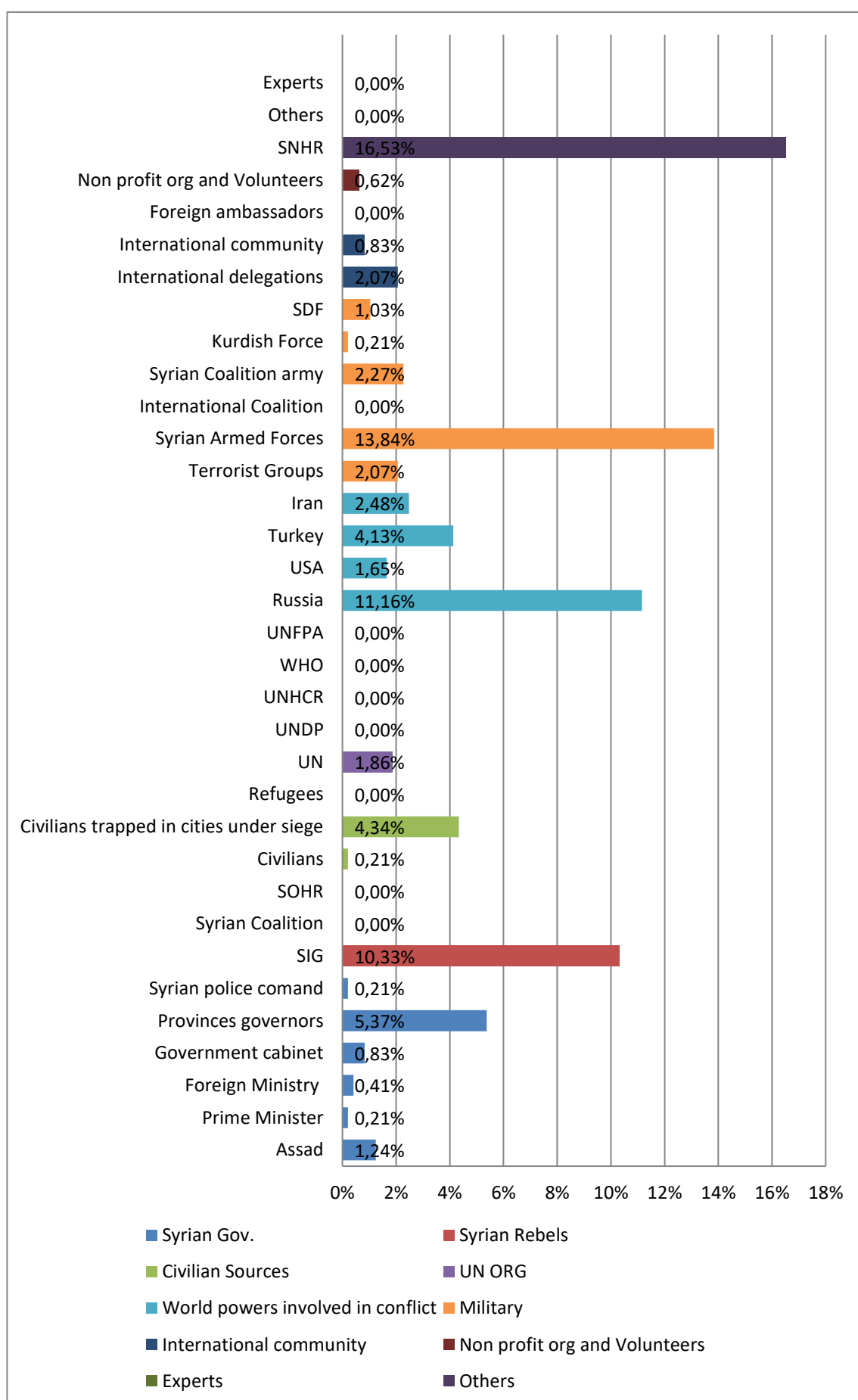


Table 55. January 2020 – Sources – percentages



Appendix F – List of articles

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