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We have to make sure that everybody this time sees and knows what's happening in Syria. Welcome to Media at Risk, a podcast from the Center for Media at Risk at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. My name is Liz Hallgren, and I'm a doctoral student at the school and a member of the Center's steering committee. My guest today is Shamsi Sarkis, the co-founder of SMART, which stands for Syrian Media Action Revolution team. Smart was a Syrian grassroots media activism and news operation that opened under the cover of night, essentially in 2011 as the Syrian conflict was reaching one of its many peaks. At one point, the largest independent media organization in the country, with over 300 journalists operating covertly on the ground, Smart was forced to close in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic as international funding for their work went dry. And the Syrian story took a backseat in international news. COVID was the nail in the coffin for smart, but issues with international funding plagued the group's growth and progress throughout their 10 years of media activism and opposition journalism. So welcome, Shamsi, and thanks so much for joining me. It's a real privilege to have you here. The focus of today's episode is the unique challenges that face startup grassroots journalism groups in conflict zones and the kinds of resources that are needed to sustain them. And so we're going to dig in specifically on why it can be nearly impossible to secure these resources. But first, Shamsi, I want to start by asking you to give us sort of a brief overview of SART, what it was, it's overall mission. So hello Li and thank you for receiving me today in your podcast. It started at the very first days of the uprising in Syria, so we gathered because we had a very strong sense of the history of Syria where in 1982 there was a massacre in Hama which was Completely off record. In that year, the Assad regime, father Assad, completely destroyed the city of Hama, and there were between 10 and 40,000 casualties in 3 weeks. And nobody even heard about this before, like the years 2000. Uh, so we didn't want the story to repeat again. So our first instinct was we have to make sure that everybody this time sees and knows what's happening in Syria. So we started very basically to buy gears, cameras, and satellite modems and funneling them in in Syria, and we funneled the first satellite modem. In April 2011 and start making contact with activists or demonstrators, normal people, young people, basically students, university students, and sending them these gears so they could just report what was happening in Syria on the social media on Facebook and YouTube, and this is how it all started. What we were doing later on was trying to organize all this because when you have thousands of activists, if it's not organized, if one is called by the political services or police, they can call the whole network. So we had to organize everything and we start, you know, using VPN creating rooms, using all kinds of processes to make everybody anonymous and able to work safely as much as he or she could. This was like the first year and a half. Then there was the militarization of what was happening in Syria. There were groups of rebels fighting the regime also, and it was the time to start to do more professional journalism because to report on the war is different from reporting about demonstrations. We had a full strategy to change. The media landscape in Syria, not only to create the media, but it was a theory of change actually. How can you make journalism in a country that didn't use journalists in Syria, there was no democracy and no independent journalists since the 50s. So you have to recreate all the basics for that. So you need to train people, you need to have means to print magazines or news. Papers, you need means to be able to stream radio broadcasts, so you need antennas or FMs. You need ways of communicating safely. So you need internet access and communication gears. You need to have media projects. All these things were to be done simultaneously or in parallel to be able to give a chance to journalists to emerge from Syria again. And we were quite successful to do that in the year of 2013. Everywhere in the world, we became a major source of information for international news outlets. And I think that it's clear that smart is such a singular model for what journalism and media can and should be, where you have these really strategic goals of journalism. You talked about informing Soldiers or providing information for local news outlets and then eventually providing content for Western news outlets. And so I'm curious, what kinds of places did you go to get support for the really unique work that you were doing and What kind of feedback did you receive from potential funders, potential supporters when you pitched your group to them? So again, there was an evolution in the funding. When we started the first year, we had 100% of funding which were donations from the Syrian diaspora. So from everywhere in the world, in Europe, in Gulf countries, in the US, everywhere, so many Syrians, businessmen and normal people were giving us donations. And then at the end of 2011, beginning of 2012, this donation were starting to dry up because there were more and more humanitarian needs and medical needs. So the people shifted from the nation to the media, which was very important at that time because it was a civilian uprising and media was really the weapon of demonstrators, and then they started giving money to, you know, humanitarian projects or to medical projects. So then we shifted to the Syrian opposition and were able to guarantee funding for one more year. So this allowed us to work completely independently of any non-Syrian funding for 2 years, and then again this funding dried up and we had to turn towards international donors. We tried to get funding from Media development agencies, but it didn't work. They were not really interested in funding us, but governments did actually, and I'm talking about democratic governments because they saw the importance of our work and we've been financed by several governments for several years actually. And then we, we grew larger and larger and had more and more backers until the change of administration in the US and the change of policy of the US and Syria and then all the other donors also changed their policies and then in a couple of years we lost all our international donors. And everything stopped with the COVID crisis because there there was a shift in the priorities. I'd like to pause for a point of context here. Shortly after recording this episode, Vladimir Putin began Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In Russia, foreign journalists have been forced to flee as Putin's crackdown on the press intensifies, and at least 5 journalists have been killed covering the war so far. In many ways, the conflict in Ukraine and that in Syria have been likened to one another. But with Ukraine's proximity to the West, it's worth thinking about how their trajectories will be different. Will Western attention turn back inward, leaving Ukrainian and Russian journalists to fend for themselves? What kind of legitimacy might these journalists enjoy that serious didn't? I hope you'll listen to the rest of today's episode with these questions in mind. Would you say then that the funding from international groups, whether it be governments or media development agencies, nonprofits, sort of dried up with the shift in focus on the part of the West sort of post 2017, away from the Syrian crisis. And while the crisis we know Continues on today, because it sort of wasn't front page news, the work of journalists, media activists on the ground, lost the cachet that it might have once had in the eyes of these donors. So yeah, there were several moments of change of the storytelling about what was happening in Syria that affected our relation with donors or changed the donors themselves that were interested in working in Syria. In 2013 when we started, we were still in, in the story of a revolution that didn't completely succeed from the beginning because it was repressed so harshly by the regime. And people trying to defend themselves by showing what was happening. But with the militarization that intensified in 2013-2014, it was more about covering the war. So it was very important also for us to understand who was whom, so the people on the ground can also know who they are dealing with. So we started doing this work. But then with the rising of Daesh, especially starting from 2015, there was again a new story in Syria. Nobody was interesting about knowing what was happening to the Syrian people. Everybody was interesting about Daesh and al Qaeda in Syria. We were not very interested in understanding what was Daesh and al Qaeda. If we knew them, we already differentiated them from other groups, and that was the end of the story for us. But for the Western countries, it was a war on terrorism, and the story of a revolution in Syria became a story of war on Daesh, and that was not our story at all. From a Syrian perspective, Daesh was an awful group, a terrorist group that killed and abducted about something between 5 and 15,000 Syrians. But the regime killed about 400,000 at least and abducted at least the same amount. So although Daesh is awful, the regime was much, much more awful. It was the main preoccupation for us, but nobody was interested in talking about the Syrian regime anymore. So it was a very, very difficult time for us to find funding for that because nobody was interested in funding Syrian media, targeting Syrian people, and telling them stories that are of interest for them. They were only interested about knowing stories about Daesh. So we never played that game actually as much. We did it when we had to do it, but not as the, you know, the baseline of our some Syrian outlets did it because of the funding. The funding was oriented to that. If you were doing like anti-terrorism communication, you could get funding. Although we were. Doing anti-terrorism communication, but not only about Daesh, but also about the regime terrorism. That was our main focus. So we are less and less funded when things started to shift in 2015. Yeah, and it sounds like what you're describing is not only a shift in priorities, but also just a difference in priorities between What Syrians needed to know and what your group as Syrians covering the Syrian conflict at the time was prioritizing and what the West wanted to see prioritized. And when what you were covering wasn't the same when those priorities didn't match up, that's when there was no funding or that's when it declined. I'm struck by that because in a lot of ways, it seems like journalism should be a service and Smart was trying To provide a service to the Syrian people but had to sort of toe this line of also providing a service to the West. Media should be oriented, I would say even more in the context of the war to the communities. You want to help communities to be able to, you know, survive during the war if If you're an activist, you don't want them only to survive, but you want them to resist and eventually to, to succeed in their revolution. But at least you want to help them in, into surviving. But again, this was never the interest of any funer. Although the gold keywords was Resilience is something that international donors love. I don't know why. Actually I hate this word. Resilience is accepting your fate of being a victim and stay in that status for years and years till the war passes and you can live again. So it's just a passive way of surviving without any resistance. But in many cases, you just don't need to be resilient, you need to be resistant, which is very different. And I was very explicit about that when I was going to see funders saying I don't want to be resilient. We want S smart to be a resistance group. And yeah, many funders didn't like it at all because nobody wants to find Uh, resistance groups, but everybody wants to find a resilience group which basically are groups that are not doing anything interesting, just waiting that the story or the history passes. Right. In sort of straddling this line between media and activism and what might traditionally be thought of as journalism in a Western context as this sort of objective, non-biased, quote unquote, ability to cover the news of the day, obviously was incompatible with what you needed to do and what the country needed, what the people on the ground needed. I'm curious how you were able to convince folks coming from that Western context that what you were doing could speak to that journalistic standard or norm. That they were used to. In 2013 we started broadcasting FM in Syria, which was a huge challenge because you have to install these broadcasting towers at the front, the war front, so you can target both sides of the front. So it was very dangerous and it was very complex, you know, you have to bring antennas that are 5 or 6 m high and start them and having a broadcaster with HQ and be able to protect it and Working 24 hours a day, so it was quite a difficult project. So when we succeeded in that, there were international development agencies who were sponsoring a new Syria in radio, and they came to us and they say, OK, you have to, to broadcast our radio. I said, uh, of course, we're having this project where we would broadcast several radios, so it's a shared streaming. We can give you your window of like 2 to 4 hours. a day, but of course we have our own rules. So there are things, for example, if you're talking about civilians that are killed, you should use the word martyr because you have to say this word, and they were like, No, this is not a journalistic term. You're not understanding everything about journalists. You should remove the word martyr from your dictionary or journalistic dictionary. So I laughed at them and I said, OK, but I have a team of 5 guys. Uh, working on a broadcaster and they're surrounded by Salafist. And if they don't use the word martyr, they will get their head cut off. So if you don't like it, I don't mind you take some, some of your staff, train them, and send them to Syria, and they will guard the broadcaster. And if they cut their head, it will be your responsibility. But as long as our guys who are doing the broadcasting, you will use the term marker. I know it's not journalistic, but I don't care at all that it's not journalistic. I'm not doing it because it's the right term to use. I'm doing it to protect my people there. So that's, that's the work of international media agencies. They are out on the ground. They don't even know their culture. They don't even know what's happening on the ground. They're not allowed to go there. Nobody would put their foot in Syria, but they want to tell us how to do things. Of course they are right, good journalism is what they are saying. But in this context, you're not able to do good journalists. In this context, you're, you're just able to do what you can do and there are things you cannot do, even if they are the right thing to do, it's not the right time to do that. Of course, we were very aware of that we were not doing perfect journalism. So this paroxysm of good journalism is sometimes just Out of the reality. Yes, you can do that when you're very comfortable in a Western country. You can try to do very good journalism, but when you're in a context such as in Syria, you can just try to do journalists, not without the same rules. You have to adapt your rules, but you need to provide information for the communities anyway. I want to jump in here to make sure one thing is very clear. Shaunzi and I are not suggesting that Syrian journalists, or smart journalists specifically, were not capable of doing journalism in the traditional sense, but rather that this ideal of journalism is truly just that, an ideal. Shanzi is saying that using the completely objective language that his funders expected was not possible for his team, because it would have been considered so offensive by the warring factions in the area that his team would have been in danger. What we're trying to emphasize is that journalism, far from a fixed notion, is contextual. It cannot exist outside of the environment in which it is being done. And it should be understood and respected as a product of those constraints. Chanzi's funders, based in the west, had expectations that were quite literally impossible for his team, not because they couldn't do it, but because it was a matter of life or death to make specific journalism choices. Let's listen back in as Shanti explains further. When the Western country is at war, they are totally aware that war journalism is very contextual. When the US went to Iraq and had this embedded journalists with this. Huge list of conditions and what they have to do to be embedded. It was very obvious for them that it's the only thing that can be done, and the journalist accepted and nobody said, oh, these journalists from Reuters, AFP, Washington Post, or Le Monde are not doing proper journalists. They accepted these conditions and they did proper journalists anyway. But in Syria, they just forget about this context that It's a war and we're doing war journalist. Just the rules aren't the same. You have to adapt to war, and they just didn't want to accept it for us, and it was pure hypocrisy. Again, they were promoting resilience, nothing else. They were not promoting good journalism. They never helped anybody inside Syria to do good journalists. They helped people go out of Syria to start doing good journalists, but these people are not working in Syria anymore. And we were not doing that. We were trying to make goods inside Syria, which is very different. To work in a Syrian outlet in the context of war, you should work as we were doing actually. That was the best option. Actually, it was the only option. My question following that is, is it possible for the Western definition of a free press to survive in those places or does that miss the point? Is that not even? The goal. I remember there was an international conference on journalists and there was this guy challenging me saying, OK, you have smart that is probably funded by international donors. How can you say you're independent? And it was a guy from a very known international NGO and I said, Oh, I'm at least as much independent as you are with your funding from international donors, or as the Washington Post or whatever huge outlet. That is funded by private donors which can be billionaires, have their own interests, and also influencing sometimes the credibility of these outlets. So I don't think, you know, completely independent journalism doesn't exist in the West more. It exists but not more than it existed in Syria. I'm pretty sure we were much more independent than most of the most famous international. media outlets. The irony there is that those who can pull the strings, right, like those who have the power and the resources have to see it that way for it to be sustainable. The donors tend to patronize. They come with their very big ideas and their money and say, I know what you need to do and you will do it like this, but it's that how things work efficiently. And you know, people from other domains like In startups in the tech field, which I know quite well also, more particularly in the US, when you have somebody, an investor, they'll give them a freedom of acting like we're investing in you because we believe you guys with talent and you will succeed. We will help you with our resources. It can be financial, sometimes can be human resources. We can help you in things you like, but we'll let you do the innovation. We'll let you build your dream. In the media, it doesn't work like this. It's completely different. I think it's important to recognize the power differentials between an American college graduate who is looking to get funding for a great idea and a Syrian citizen journalist who's looking to get a grassroots media operation off the ground. We have to be honest about those really challenging and sticky dynamics at play. Yes, for sure, but it will be a long process. I don't think there is only one way of doing journalism. There are plenty of ways. There are just this hypocrisy to say there's only one way of doing good journalism. That's the way. You have to be completely neutral, but it doesn't exist. For me, good journalism is a journalism that impacts the life of, of its audience by providing them. Stories, news, services, whatever, but it has to have an impact. It could be entertainment. Entertainment is an impact, but I mean, if you don't impact you're not doing good journalist. What the donors in Syria did is just ensuring that the journalist has no impact. Is it on purpose? I'm not even sure. Shamsi, this has been really fruitful and I appreciate you taking the time. And I guess I'll just end by asking, where did all of the folks at SMART end up going and what do you think is next for media in Syria looking forward? So that people who work with smart, most of them are continuing to work in journalists. Many of them were hired by professional media outlets. I think we were a good academy for young Syrians who wanted to work in journals, and I think they are quite appreciated in the places where they're working in now. Syrian media, I think most of the Syrians working on journalists now are outside Syria. There are still, of course, young people working in Syria, but You have thousands of trained people, young people now in Western countries, in Turkey, in Lebanon, a bit everywhere in the world, and I think there will be the next generation of Syrian journalists, but unfortunately they won't be working for Syrian media. They will be working for non-Syrian media. Until one day a new Syrian media rise again or one of the still existing one grows up. So I don't know when it will happen, but I'm pretty sure it will happen. But maybe the first thing is before I think about journalists and that Maybe my conclusion. It's about changing the context in a way that good journalists can really be done in Syria, which means overthrowing the dictatorship. I think that's the first step of good journalism is being somewhere where you can really do good journalism. So step by step. Indeed. Well, that gives us so much to think about and I feel like I could continue to ask questions for hours and hours, but I will end it there. Thank you so much for your time. Really appreciate it. Thank you. By way of conclusion, it's worth making one more comparison here. In the summer of 2021, the United States completed its long retreat out of Afghanistan, leaving many Afghani journalists without protection. Since then, we know many of these journalists have been forced to flee, and are now working elsewhere, including in the United States. Like in Syria, this means that Afghani journalism, after a shift in Western priorities, has essentially been outsourced, leaving Afghanistan itself with a depleted free press ecosystem. What does it mean that Western resources are so often the lifeblood, but also the poison pill for grassroots journalism and authoritarian countries abroad? What kind of authority does this give the West to determine where a free press can thrive? These questions are hard to answer, but smart news can give us a hopeful model for the future. Thanks for listening.