

Magazine Engages Syrians and Americans

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

When I decided to start up a current affairs magazine in Damascus, my friends told me that the first edition would likely also be the last. This October our monthly magazine, Syria Today -- a Syrian-American joint venture, celebrated its third anniversary.

Historically, Syria has one of the Middle East's most repressive media environments, so the launch of a private sector, English-language publication by a joint Syrian-American team is a unique and noteworthy endeavour. Syria Today's success to date is based on the common need of both Americans and Syrians for better, more in-depth reporting on and from Syria.

Tensions with the West in the 1980s led the Syrian government to close most foreign media offices, and because of this sweeping action, Syrian contact with the rest of the world -- specifically in terms of business and journalism -- became limited. As a result of this relative isolation, journalistic standards declined vis-a-vis international standards, and even government ministers called the country's news stories "unreadable". Western readers were also desperate for information on Syria from a source other than the state-run English-language daily, the Syria Times, which continues to churn out convoluted, Orwellian-style propaganda.

Our success is also due to the keen understanding of both our Syrian and American partners of each other's strengths and weaknesses. The Syrian owners -- businesswoman Kinda Kanbar and two Damascene businessmen -- recognised from the beginning that editorial matters at an English language publication should be left to native English speakers. This gave me and other Anglo-Saxon journalists working at Syria Today a vehicle through which to help Syrian journalists develop writing skills that enable them to reach Western audiences more effectively.

However, savvy journalistic techniques without relevant facts and quotes from local experts is not enough. This is where local knowledge and social penetration are key. Our Syrian partners use their social connections to help Syria Today writers arrange key interviews. They also read writers' articles and suggest edits that help us cover sensitive issues without running foul of Syria's strict media censor.

The fact that we were able to publish each month while Syria's Assad administration struggled under intense international pressure was nothing short of a miracle. As Syria Today's American partner, I focus less on the bottom line and more on the benefits of our joint collaboration. Because Washington lists Syria as a state sponsor of

international terrorism, US development assistance is proscribed and US companies shy away from establishing business ventures and partnerships in Syria due to US economic sanctions.

So while the Syrian market is full of smuggled American goods, Americans cannot transfer much-needed professional skills to Syrians in any organised way. More than 40 years of badly administered Soviet-style socialism caused the country's best and brightest to leave, and those left behind were poorly trained and unaccustomed to international norms. Currently, Syria Today is perhaps the only private sector institution in Syria that serves as a vehicle for communicating the ideas and values behind American products on a regular basis, and as such is a rare medium for sharing business news and innovations between the two countries.

Because of the Syrian government's strict adherence to secular politics, we rarely raise the issue of religion in Syria Today. But we are able to engage in rich debate while grounded in very different cultures. American culture is explicit, freedom-loving, and straightforward. Syrian culture is more indirect, nuanced and hierarchical -- the latter not only due to Syria's authoritarian system of government, but also because of traditional patriarchal family structures. Perhaps this is why one doesn't hear much in Syria about Western business ventures with Arab entrepreneurs; subtlety suits Syrians because involvement with Westerners could be used against them. In the West, we often shout about such things from the rooftops. It's a matter of style, not substance.

In the past, radical political change in authoritarian countries had to precede American engagement with state-dominated economies. With the advent of globalisation and the movement of states like Syria towards market capitalism, however, the American private sector can now engage Syrian business without going directly through the Syrian regime. But to do so properly, Washington needs to rethink its sanctions policy toward Syria and other such states, and encourage America's private sector to use its soft power to better relations. This approach will go a long way to repairing America's reputation in the world and promote mutual understanding.

Syria Today and ventures like it are more than just businesses -- they are vehicles for engaging the public within countries that otherwise have very little contact with one another.

Andrew J. Tabler is an outgoing fellow at the Washington-based Institute of Current World Affairs and editor-in-chief of Damascus' Syria Today magazine. ❖

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