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Mobile Media Use in the Zone of Conflict

*Findings from Early Phases
of the Syrian Civil War (2011 – 2013)*

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Impressum

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Empirical research conducted in 2012 and 2013

Abstract

Social media usage during the recent uprisings in Arabian countries has gained increasing attention in CHI research. This study adds to these insights by providing some findings on the use of ICT, specifically mobile media, by oppositional forces and political activists during the Syrian civil war. The presented study is based on 17 interviews with Syrian FSA soldiers, oppositional activists and refugees. A first analysis showed evidence for some very specific use patterns during wartime (compared to media usage of political activists under less anomic conditions). The study also describes a fragmented telecom infrastructure in today's Syria: government-controlled regions offer fairly intact infrastructures while rebel-controlled regions are cut-off from telephone and internet. Moreover, the central and very critical role of mobile video for documenting, mobilization, and propaganda is discussed.

Keywords: Mobile Media, ICT Infrastructures, Field Study, Appropriation, Political Conflict.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years we have seen an increasing density of ICT usage in support of political activism and a developing interest on the part of CHI and related communities in these topics (e.g. for an overview see [15]). Protest movements in the Arab world have attracted special attention (e.g., [1,10,11,22]). In this paper, we want to contribute to this discourse by describing ICT use during the Syrian civil war.

Reacting to the events in other Arab countries, civil uprisings started in Syria in spring 2011 and have developed into what is effectively a civil war since then. Estimates suggest that at the time of research more than 100,000 Syrians have been killed and some 1.8 million have left their homes, fleeing mostly to neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey [20].

Most analyses of the recent uprisings in the Arab world attribute a major role to the use of social media. During the first wave of successful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Facebook is considered to have played a major role. It has contributed to mobilizing the population under the constraints of rather rigid censorship and to the organization of political activities [11,22]. In case of Syria, however, and unlike other cases, spontaneous uprisings did not result in regime change but led instead to a civil war, involving regional and international powers.

In the following, we want to investigate ICT use, and just as importantly, its absence, during the civil war. The work is part of a more general and systematic attempt to understand the interrelation between IT artefacts and social practices [25,26], in this case to make specifically sense of the relationship between ICT use and social, technical, economic, and political contexts of political activism. As such, we have conducted 'on the ground' studies in a number of locations over time, including Palestine, Tunisia and Syria [21,22]. In each case, and as a result of the very difficult and dangerous conditions under which such studies have to take place, we are forced to manage our data collection and analysis methods under significant constraints.

The paper is structured as follows: First we discuss some related studies, and then we briefly introduce the situation in wartime Syria. After a description of our research methods, we present data from the interviews we conducted. Last, we discuss some insights from our analysis and draw some conclusions regarding findings and further work.

2 STATE OF THE ART

A series of studies on social media use during the so-called "Arab Spring" were published [1,10,11,17,]. These studies describe aspects of the use of blogging and micro-blogging sites, such as Twitter, mainly during the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. While hugely valuable, these studies mainly use 'logging' methodologies and as such tell us less about how the use of social media interacts with users' political activities in practice. In addressing this gap, Wulf et al. [22] investigated how social media use supported political activists 'on the ground' in Tunisia. These researchers conducted a similar study in Palestine to observe political activists using social media to demonstrate against wall building near their hometown [21].

Al-Ani et al. [1] investigated the Egyptian blogosphere during the "Arab Spring" uprisings in 2011, based on qualitative and quantitative analysis of blog postings. They identified so-called "counter-narratives" created by Egyptian bloggers to protest against the Government's official communication and described the blogosphere as an

"alternative public space" ([1], p. 25). In another study on blog postings, Mark et al. [13] focused on "war diaries", published by Iraqi bloggers during the war in Iraq. Based on topic modeling and a quantitative analysis of postings, the authors investigated the relationship between war postings and other topics, notably postings on people's everyday life and their daily routines. Semaan and Mark [16] examined trust building in disrupted environments, based on (mainly telephone) interviews with Iraqi civilians during the second Gulf war, focusing on (public) identity. In another study Mark and Semaan [12] focused on collaboration structures and patterns of action during wartime, based on semi-structured telephone interviews with civilians from Iraq and Israel. Zhou et al. [23] did a quantitative study about the usage of Twitter during the post-election protests in Iran, and analyzed over three million tweets of publicly accessible users, thus providing insights into the "the dynamics of information propagation that are special to Twitter" ([23], p.123).

Nonetheless, there remain few papers which directly investigate how Internet and social media are actually appropriated by political activists under dangerous conditions (such as armed conflicts, political instability, disrupted environments, occupation, or military rule) and how their use is mediated by a range of social, political and economic factors.

3 SYRIA AND THE CIVIL WAR

These disrupted contexts quite often form significant obstacles for empirical research that goes beyond log file analyses of digital communication data. One might anticipate that there will be significant differences between temporary unstable political conditions and life during (longer lasting) conditions of civil war. In this study we present some first findings from interviews with Syrian activists and refugees to gather some qualitative insights in the use of social and mobile media during the ongoing civil war in Syria.

After the end of the Ottoman Empire, Syria became part of the French mandate zone and achieved its independence in 1946. The first 25 years of Syrian independence were characterized by political instability; republican periods being interrupted by various military coup d'états. In 1971, Hafiz al Assad, the father of the current president, came to power and remained up to his death in 2000. A savvy politician he brought political stability and certain economic developments to the country. During his 30 years of one-man rule, political dissenters were suppressed by arrest and torture. When the Muslim Brotherhood mounted a rebellion in the provincial town of Hama in 1982, Assad suppressed it, killing between 10,000–25,000 people. The Assad regime is characterized by the fact that the upper ranks of the military hierarchy, the political elite, and the secret service organizations are highly intertwined and run by networks of loyal Alawites, a religious minority to which the Assad family belongs, too (see e.g. [14]).

After his father's dead, Bashar al Assad came to power in 2000. It has been suggested that his accession to power "evoked ripples of derision and criticism within and outside the country" [24] even then. His policy was initially followed a political and economic reform agenda, though political reforms ceased within a year. Some aspects of the Syrian economy have nevertheless been reformed. Like other Arab countries, over the past decades Syria has seen one of the internationally highest birth rates, leaving the country with more than one third of the population below 14 years and an unemployment rate among people under 25 of almost 20% [5,18]. Socio-economic inequality increased. This became specifically an issue in cities with a high poverty rate, such as Daraa and Homs, rural areas hit hard by a drought in early 2011, and the poorer districts of other large cities.

The political protests began on March 15, 2011, in the southern city of Daraa, well after the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes had already been toppled in the Arab Spring movement. Over the next days, demonstrations and confrontations escalated in Daraa and started to spread to other Syrian cities. Protesters demanded the release of political prisoners, the abolition of Syria's 48-year emergency law, more freedoms, and an end to pervasive government corruption.

In April 2011, the Syrian Army was deployed to quell the uprising, and soldiers were ordered to open fire on demonstrators. After months of military sieges, the protests evolved into an armed rebellion. Opposition forces, mainly composed of defected soldiers and civilian volunteers, became increasingly armed and organized as they unified into larger groups, with some groups receiving military aid from several foreign countries.

The Internet played a considerable role in the developments under Bashar al Assad. Under his government, the Internet was introduced to Syria in 2001. However, access to social media applications, such as Facebook and YouTube, was officially banned. Still, Assad left the country's access to the Internet mostly intact during the 21-month struggle with rebels – except for shorter shutdowns in the end of November 2012 [4]. However, the situation looked quite different in those parts of the country controlled nowadays by the opposition.

During the civil war, the Internet itself became a contested space. Opposition actors claimed to have monitored the inboxes of Assad and his wife in real time for several months. In several cases they claim to have used information to warn colleagues in Damascus of imminent regime moves against them [7]. The pro-government Syrian Electronic Army, mentioned in [4], has also been accused of DDoS attacks, phishing scams, and other tricks to fight opposition activists online [2]. At checkpoints, Assad forces examine laptops for programs that would allow users to bypass government's spyware. In Internet cafes government officials checked users' identification [4]. The government seems to also survey and manipulate Facebook and Google access via 'man in the middle' attacks [19]. In sum, government in this context has a sophisticated appreciation of Internet affordances and how to use them for its purposes.

It is important to notice that our study represents the state of affairs in spring 2013, covering the first 20 months of Syrian civil war. The situation continues to evolve. The first phase of the Syrian civil war was dominated mainly by three armed fractions: the official Syrian Army (OSA), the oppositional Free Syrian Army (FSA), and armed Kurdish forces (mainly in North-East of Syria). In the meantime new armed forces gained increasing influence on both sides (as Assad`s allies e.g. the Iranian revolutionary guard and the Hezbollah, for the opposition e.g. different Islamist groups like the Al-Nusra Front, Syrian Islamic Front, ISIL, foreign militants of different origin). Oppositional forces are fragmented quarreling and the situation has become increasingly unclear.

4 RESEARCH METHODS

Our method focuses on an explorative analysis of narrative interview data. Narrative interviews are intended to elicit detailed 'stories' and are regarded as reflexive productions of both interviewers and interviewees. They tend not to take the question/ answer form associated with traditional social science (see e.g. [8,9]). Given civil war conditions, interviews could not realistically take place in Syria. The research is therefore based on empirical data directly collected from interviews with Syrian citizens in Turkey (near the Syrian border) and Germany. We gathered additional data from one Skype interview, a written e-mail interview and the analysis of online sources.

In a first phase, two authors traveled to Turkey from December 29, 2012 to January 8, 2013. Keeping its borders open, Turkey hosts a large number of Syrian refugees. The authors started their journey from Istanbul, flying to Adana and then travelling with public transportation to Iskenderun, Antakya, Reyhana, Kirikan, Kilis, and Gaziantep. The authors visited the border at Kilis and went to two camps of Syrian refugees: a tent camp at Apaydin and a container camp directly near the border control in Kilis. However, the Turkish authorities did not permit the authors to enter and so conversations took place at the entrance. Since Turkey hosted more than 200,000 refugees in January 2013 (now, in August 2013, more than 400,000) with a high concentration in the border areas, travelling with public transportation enabled the authors to observe and talk to a variety of Syrians who had left their country for different reasons. While the travelling route was chosen deliberately, the interviewees were selected opportunistically. We approached actors wherever we saw opportunities and interviewed those who were willing to speak to us, for instance in buses, hotels, at border posts, or in front of refugee camps.

In this part of the study, we conducted eleven interviews: four with (former) soldiers of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), three with political activists, and four with other refugees. The interviews lasted between 15 minutes and 2.5 hours. In the case, of the political activist called A in this publication, we had a 20 minute interview at the Turkish-Syrian border complemented by a 90 minute Skype interview two weeks later. The interviews were mostly conducted in English, one in French. We did use an interpreter when interviewing X. The choice of interviewees was mostly limited to those Syrians who could speak English, German, or French. For reasons of practicality and confidentiality, we did not audio record the interviews. However, we documented the interviews every evening and added additional (field) notes. Additionally, we took photos selectively, asking carefully for permissions which we did not always receive.

In a second phase in spring 2013, we conducted an additional five interviews with Syrian refugees in Germany (face to face) and one interview with a refugee in the US. Germany hosts some 16,000 Syrian refugees [3] and another 2,000 students from Syria [6]. Our interviewees in Germany were from northern Syria and had a Kurdish background. One of them had been a political activist in Syria and by then had lived for six months in Germany, another was a student still actively engaged against the Assad regime. The other three refugees escaped Syria during the previous year. These interviews focused on the refugees' lives during the civil war and their usage of ICT. They were supported by a native Arabic interpreter. Two refugees showed us videos on their mobile phone or laptops. Interviews lasted between one to two hours.

Even the interviews in Germany involved a delicate process of trust- building. Refugees expressed concerns that the Syrian government could get access to the recordings and might take revenge against their families in Syria or even in Germany. Three of the interviewees declined any recording. One interview with a Syrian refugee living in the US was started face-to-face and later on continued by written questions and answers via e-mail.

In both phases, we collected 52 pages of interview notes and over 5 hours of audio recordings. In addition to these interviews, we observed different on-going Facebook groups and Twitter accounts dealing with the civil war to better understand the situation in Syria. One author, a native Arabic speaker, transcribed the Arabic interviews and translated interview parts and Internet sources selectively into English.

According to our explorative approach, we mainly analyzed the raw data from narrative interviews by coding the transcripts with ex-post categories. The interview data was open coded. First, authors coded their own materials. Then, their coded categories were compared and discussed. Our resulting coding scheme covers all essential parts of the

interviews. Later we mainly analysed the raw data from the transcribed interviews to explore new findings relevant for our research.

5 THE CIVIL WAR: ACCOUNTS OF SOLDIERS AND POLITICAL ACTIVISTS

In the first phase of our study, we interviewed four soldiers of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and three political activists. We will present the accounts of all four soldiers and of one political activist in depth and add insights gained from the other interviews in the discussion and conclusion section. Such an actor-centric presentation of the empirical material, we believe, offers a better understanding of unfolding personal paths during the civil war.

5.1 A Suburban Poor from Aleppo

We met X, a former fighter in the FSA with Sunni background, in Istanbul where he is working illegally in a bakery. The interview was arranged by a hotel receptionist of Lebanese-French background. He also translated from Arab back and forth into English and French. The receptionist knew X for some months, and he described his relationship to X as, *„I feel a bit like a father towards him"*.

X was 17 years old. He was brought up in one of the very poor northern suburbs of Aleppo. He started his political activities with demonstrations against the regime. He was arrested three times by the police during the demonstrations. The first time he got *"only beaten up a bit"*, the second time he was manhandled more seriously. The third time, by his account, they tortured him so badly that he left the prison with largely swollen legs. At this point, he decided to fight for the rebels. He was trained by Syrian people on the same day as his recruitment and only in the usage of an automatic gun (probably AK 47) plus later also to be a sniper, with special NATO sniper guns. His unit of the rebel forces had some 20 members. He was not allowed to know who was fighting in the other units of the force nor how large the whole rebel unit was.

After some months fighting for the rebels, X finally decided to leave having witnessed atrocities of his unit in his neighborhood. They had blown up a building in which four soldiers of Assad's army were defending themselves after being cut off their supply lines. However, there were also still civilians in the building. He told us he tried to prevent the TNT packages to explode, in vain. At that point, he decided to escape from the rebel forces. It was quite easy to get into Turkey.

It did not become clear whether X had used social media applications before the rebellion. The receptionist assumed that the boy did not use it before, at least not in a serious manner. After arriving in Istanbul with the first money he earned in the bakery, he bought a rather expensive smart phone. However, he could not reach his family since the telephone lines and mobile networks in the rebel controlled northern suburbs were broken. There was not any regular phone or Internet connection with his family. To contact him, his mother, once a week, went to a part of the town which was controlled by the Assad troops.

X explained that the officers of the rebel fighters had sophisticated satellite communication equipment, delivered mainly by the US and Western Europe. This way they coordinated activities and were able to order ammunition and arms supply.

According to the receptionist, the main reason why X had bought the expensive smart

phone was the ability to receive long text messages sent by his Imam. It did not become clear who the Imam was and which line of thinking he propagates. The receptionist mentioned that there were many imams from Katar, Libya, and other Arab countries travelling through the liberated parts of Syria and trying to gain supporters. He believed that these imams are really dangerous, and expressed his concern about the possibility of getting further involved with, *"the guys with the long beards"*.

5.2 An Academic from Deir es-Zur

We met Y, a soldier of Sunni background, by accident in our hotel lobby in Antakya. He had travelled there with two comrades. He speaks very good French and was a French lecturer at the Euphrat University in Deir es-Zur. Before the war, the city had some 500,000 inhabitants and is now almost empty. Y explains that the city center was destroyed by bombs and artillery shells. In spring 2013, there were some 600 FSA fighter almost encircled by 4,500 government soldiers armed with tanks. The FSA fighters had, in contrast, just guns and light weapons. The rebels engaged in house-to-house fighting while the government was regularly bombing the city center.

Y explains that the demonstrations in Deir es-Zur started later than the ones in Daraa and were peaceful for quite some time. Students were among the first to demonstrate. However, the secret services arrested the demonstrators and also their family members – and beat them up badly. *"After some time the situation became unsupportable"*, according to Y. So the opposition began to arm itself with guns to defend themselves against the police and secret services.

According to Y, the Assad regime tried to play the people in the city centers off against the people in the suburbs. So, in Deir es-Zur the situation was different from Aleppo where the poor suburbs were rebelling against Assad while the richer city center tended to support the regime. In Deir es-Zur the middle class living in the city center was driving the protest. However, Y also mentioned that the majority of the active FSA fighters in Deir es-Zur were from relatively poor backgrounds and in many cases were incomers from other places in Syria.

Y first supported the rebels by working in their hospital. However, six months before our interview, he decided that he also needed to help them fighting. Since that time he had been a soldier. When we met him in Antakya, it was the first time that he had been out of the country, *"to relax"*, as he said. When travelling the 300 km through Syria he needed to take side roads. There seemed to be bus lines avoiding the main roads which were at that time still controlled by Assad's troops.

After the city center was taken over by the rebels and the air force started bombing it. Almost the whole population left the city and fled to cities in the North or even into Turkey. There were only 200 families left – *"the very poor"*, as Y characterized them. His own family lived in a Turkish refugee camp close to the northern Syrian border hosting some 30,000 refugees. He visited his family just once for a day. During the rest of the time, he had no contact with them and vice versa.

In the center of Deir es-Zur there had been no telephone and Internet line working at least since the rebels took over. The FSA fighters had two satellite phone which connected them to their command and supply lines. He was not able to use any means for (private) communication. In his words *"I do not have time for that. We are at the front!"*

During the house-to-house fighting in Deir es-Zur they found dead bodies. At one place they found the bodies of 80 women and children, and in another quarter they found another 12 dead bodies – decapitated. To support his claims, he offered to show us photos or videos which he had on his mobile. He mentioned one more of these massacres – also

stating that the government forces used civilians as human shields in case they got encircled. Government forces seemed to specifically target students since they were the ones who were leading the local demonstrations and resistance.

5.3 Two lower Middle Class Fighters from Baniyas

We met Z, a young Syrian soldier of Sunni background, in front of a refugee camp at the Syrian-Turkish border in Kilis. After some conversation, he took us into a room inside a container building where more members of his family were sitting on mattresses. This building normally housed Syrians visiting their relatives in the camp. However, he and his family had stayed there over night because they were not directly admitted to the camp which offered, according to them, better sleeping conditions.

Z's family consisted of his brother, also a FSA soldier who had been wounded by a grenade, their mother, and two younger women. We were not fully sure whether they were siblings or the soldiers' wives. Like Z the mother also spoke good English, while the other members of the family did not. All three women were fully covered with a black headscarf; the young fighter was wearing a small green feyiha (Palestinian type of scarf) on his head. The brother's wound was already healing but a large bandage covered it. The mother later said that the pieces of metal were still inside. The brother had also scars at other parts of his body (belly and arm) which he showed us in the course of our talk.

The family is from Baniyas, a town south of Latakia where the demonstrations started already on March 18th, 2011. The town was later on besieged by the Syrian army and is, according to our interviewees, now almost completely destroyed. Z used the English "*flat'*" and the German term "*kaputt*" to describe the state of his hometown and their family house. The mother showed us a photo on Z's older smart phone presenting the place where their family home had been.

Z had been working as a sailor on a ship before the uprising started. He participated in the demonstration movement. Following the siege of their home town they armed themselves and joined the FSA. After the crackdown on the uprising in Baniyas, Z and his brother left their hometown to serve at another front. Thereafter, their mother was interviewed by the secret service who asked her insistently about the whereabouts of her sons. She claims to have been badly beaten up by the secret service officers and she feared that she would be - or she even had been (not entirely clear in the interview) - tortured by electrodes at her hands, legs, or the head. Therefore, she and the rest of the family decided to follow her sons who meanwhile did "their service" with the FSA in Aleppo. From Aleppo they had travelled to the Turkish border to rest and heal the brother's wounds.

They talked rather openly about the current military conditions in Aleppo. The Syrian air force was bombing Aleppo, or parts of it, with MIG 21 and 23 planes and heavy bombs. According to them, the Syrian air force bombs the liberated city of Azar, just next to Kiliz on the Syrian side of the border, at least five times a day. Iranian soldiers seemed to be fighting in Aleppo on the Assad side. The brother of Z claimed that he had participated in the beheading of two Iranian soldiers during the fights around Aleppo.

With regard to media use, Z told us that he had Facebook and Skype accounts and used Facebook inside Syria to get information about the political and military situation. He did not post information himself. He showed us the Facebook icon on his smart phone.

To illustrate their accounts of the fights going on in Aleppo and in Baniyas, Z and his family each used older mobile phones equipped with camera and video function, obviously owned by the two brothers. While it was not always easy to realize on the very small screens what was going on in the videos, we could recognize three short videos and one photo (presented by Z):

- A video presenting a deserted street scene inside a city, probably in Aleppo, supposedly a part of the front line.
- A video showing a dead person wearing clothes, laying in a ditch, inside an urban environment.
- A video presenting the dead body of a friend of the two soldiers, his head facing the ground and covered in blood. The head is lifted up by someone, a lake of blood becoming visible under his head. The dead body is located inside a destroyed house.
- A photo of a completely burned human body positioned inside a destroyed house.

Additionally, Z's brother presented to us via other smart phone images, a street fight in a city, probably Aleppo, with sounds of shooting.

Having left the family's quarter, one author was sitting by herself in front of the container. A Syrian boy from Aleppo of maybe 16 or 17 years of age came to her and presented videos from a mobile phone. The first video was professionally produced, probably from TV news. There was some information in Arabic before the video started. The boy explained to the second author what that video was about: it showed how an Assad soldier beheaded a person with a sword. The video took about three minutes and it was presented in considerable detail. While presenting this video, a whole group of younger and elder boys and adults joined the crowd to watch.

The second video the Syrian young boy was showing on the mobile showed an old man who was walking in an urban space. Suddenly he was shot and felt down, probably still alive. Then more shots hit his body. The video had a length of about 1 minute. This video was not professionally produced because its quality was not very good.

5.4 An early Sunni Activist

We meet A, an activist with Sunni background, who speaks perfect English, in a local bus from Antakya to Reyhana. His family is from the region south of Idlib in western Syria. He studied in Syria and then worked in Dubai. When he came back to Syria, he had saved some money and was preparing to leave for Europe to continue his studies. At that point, the uprisings happened in Tunisia and he felt that something needed to be done in Syria. He told us that he started to think about mobilizing against the Assad regime already in December 2010 - when the uprising had just started in Tunisia. At that time, he was thinking of mobilizing against the corruption of the regime. He was not, at that point, thinking about ousting the president: "*We were against the corruption not against Assad – in the beginning*".

A started to work on Facebook in mid-January 2011 in creating a group called 'Syrian Revolution'. He got some personal friends involved. They added some more friends they knew. In the end of February 2011, when A was arrested, the group consisted of a rather small number of activists. A thought of carrying out some coordinated actions such as crushing a monument dedicated to Hafiz el Assad or blocking the road between Aleppo and Damascus by means of a demonstration. Coordinated actions of this type, they hoped, would attract international attention and kick-start an uprising in Syria.

While still planning these activities, A got arrested in an internet cafe in the town of Hama. At that time he lived in Homs where it was relatively safe to conduct political activities via Facebook. In Hama, due to the city's history, there were more secret service activities. Not living in Hama and lacking the appropriate social networks, A did not

know that the owner of the Internet cafe was an informant of one of the secret services.

When A was arrested, the other members of his Facebook group began to hide, fearing arrest, as well. During the interrogations, A was asked to give away the passwords for both of his Facebook accounts. They also asked him for his other passwords ("*They asked for the password of everything*"). After being detained, his family had to bribe officials - just to find out where he was imprisoned. Again, he alleged mistreatment but he did not mention details since we did not ask for them either. Normally people like him would be arrested, at the first time, for some five days maybe. However, he had hosted university students from Germany, UK, and US in 2008, a fact which he had to declare to the police at that time. Now, the secret police found that suspicious: "*they had somehow black marked me for that*" and argued that he had hosted spies in the past. Therefore, he was imprisoned for almost a year.

We asked him why they used Facebook for organizing their political activities. He said it was the safest way to do. Telephone networks were strongly surveilled in Assad's Syria. Facebook was the most common communication media. According to him, Facebook worked perfectly effectively for their group. He added that the first demonstrations in Syria were all organized via Facebook ("*Under such regimes, you know, you cannot just talk to people about going to a demonstration*").

Via Facebook he also came in contact with a London-based opposition TV station, called Barada (that, according to WikiLeaks, is funded by the US government). One of his friends knew their emissions and Facebook site. At that time, they were far less well-known than Al Jazeera. But he started to watch them and then contacted them via Facebook. Barada tried to organize a demonstration in Damascus on February 5 (via their TV program). However, due to rainy and cold weather this call for action did not result in anything, according to A.

While A was in prison, two of his brothers were killed. They had become politically active after his arrest. They organized demonstrations and an uprising in his hometown – which became one of the first to be fully controlled by the opposition. When his hometown was taken over by the protesters, one of his brothers protected the local policemen who were his friends. This brother was later shot at a government's control post because the secret service assumed that he was one of the leaders in the local uprising (at that time the local resistance in the town was still rather non-violent).

His hometown was also one of the first to start armed resistance. The town got weapons and won a small battle against the army in June 2011. According to A, the people in his village were very badly equipped at the beginning of their armed fight, "*they had only four Kalashnikovs, the rest was equipped with small hunting weapons*" compared to the army: "*The reinforcement was a convoy of some 30, partly armored, cars.*" His second brother died in the fighting around his hometown.

When A was finally released from prison, he was able to make money by engaging with international media. He started working for Al Jazeera (Arab Language Edition) after a friend who was in contact with Al Jazeera connected him. He provided information directly to the headquarters in Katar, and three of his reports were broadcasted. He communicated with Al Jazeera via Skype on what he called "*Airspace Internet*". Interestingly, he was not exactly sure how the network was working, for instance, whether the router communicated via a satellite. However, he knew the brand name of the routers: "*one was a German company, called iDirect*".

While staying in his hometown, he got wounded once by a shell. In November 2012, he finally left the town with his remaining family. Just before, a nephew had been killed by a helicopter attack in the town. At the time of the interview, his town was rather deserted but some families and rebel fighters remained still there. The Assad army was running 18

checkpoints around the town. He felt somehow bad that he left his hometown but found it necessary to do: *"we needed to buy things ... now I need to make some money."* He took the rest of his family out of Syria and rented a house in Turkey.

Since being released from prison, he has also been working as a freelancer for BBC and different German media. His primary activities for them seem to be translating, finding informants, and organizing trips into Syria.

He sees himself as an Internet activist who uses Facebook and Skype to inform the world about what is going on in Syria. He also created his own news flow, publishing via Facebook about the current situation in Syria and the political regimes all over Arabia. He also thought about producing a newspaper for the liberated part of Syria.

6 DISCUSSION

Our study is based on narrative interviews with Syrian activists and refugees conducted during a period from December 2012 to March 2013. Situation and conditions in wartime Syria are changing very dynamically. Thus, our insights represent mainly the state of affairs in early 2013. As the Syrian refugee, now living in the US, pointed out:

"Even more, in the beginning of the uprising there was not much differentiation in positions: there were those who were against the regime, and those who were with the regime. Now there are multiple camps differentiating across multiple issues: military vs. peaceful action; religious vs. secular future;..." (US refugee).

In this context, our study provides a "snapshot" of the situation in spring 2013, including narratives of the first one and a half years of the Syrian civil war.

In any case, the analysis of our interviews provides us with findings that will be discussed in the following section. The narratives and our other sources add up to some sort of coherent picture regarding the motivation of oppositional activists in Syria: our interviewees report severe atrocities and shocking violations of international legal standards of both sides of the war. Their accounts also point to the fact that the ruthless suppression techniques the Assad regime applied which include the sniping at demonstrators with live ammunition and their torture in prison have prepared the ground for these developments.

6.1 Differences in Media Usage between Arab Uprisings and longer-lasting Wartime

In other studies on uprisings in Arabian countries (e.g., in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya) evidence showed the high importance of social media usage (e.g. for mobilization and organization of protest activities and direct action). In several case studies Facebook was found to play a major role in communication of political activists. As Deleted et al. [22] have pointed out in Tunisia, the key success factor for political mobilization was the interplay between social media (Facebook) and traditional mass media (Al Jazeera TV news channel).

Although some of these studies showed that political activists using social media took severe personal risks (imprisonment in Tunisia, cf. [22]; arrest and ban from internet in Palestine, cf. [21]), the situation for social and mobile media users in case of Syrian activists differs significantly: While in case of the shorter Arab uprisings single users were banned from using internet sources and social media, during the longer-lasting wartime in Syria government, secret services and telecom providers cut off internet

infrastructure for whole cities and regions.

In addition to the findings of Mark and Semaan [12] investigating social media use of Iraqi during wartime, our study provides insights from a much more activist group of people.

The four interviewed soldiers represent rather distinct socio-economic backgrounds and life histories. However, there are some obvious parallels in their accounts. None of them originally had an explicit political agenda and wanted to change the political order by means of violence. They were rather drawn into becoming soldiers or activists, due to the openly violent suppression of the demonstration and, at least in the case of X, after suffering from the regime's torturing procedures.

6.2 Fragmented Media Infrastructures

One strong finding of our study is that the war has also fragmented the Internet infrastructure of the country, not only temporarily but in a quite permanent way.

In this way, Syria today is divided in two parts: in government-controlled regions we find a fairly intact telephone and internet infrastructure but with quite sophisticated control and surveillance strategies and in regions controlled by rebels there is little or no telephone and internet infrastructure. That means that the civil war frontlines are represented in the communication infrastructures. While one saw a total cut-off of infrastructure e.g. during the uprisings in Egypt, for a short period of time, the Syrian civil war produced much more differentiated government control strategies. Due to the complex geography of the frontlines, the geographical distance between stable Internet access and cut-off infrastructure could be very short in many cases, on- and off-internet access even divides cities that are divided into government- and FSA-controlled quarters.

There are some exceptions. Some rebel regions near the Turkish-Syrian border are provided with mobile telephone and internet infrastructure from Turkish providers. Furthermore, the West has donated an alternative telecommunication infrastructure to the rebels: satellite phone. This costly infrastructure was, at least at the time of research, reserved for fighters, and in reality mainly to their commanders. The population living in those parts of the country controlled by the opposition has been disconnected. While the FSA soldiers are preoccupied with military activities, they still lack access to their families, specifically when they live in liberated areas.

6.3 Importance of Mobile Video

Given the limited opportunities for internet access and the contradicting written reports, user-generated video clips (shot with mobiles) seem to become a central communication channel (if not the sine qua non) for documentation, mobilization, and propaganda.

We observed many amateur videos documenting the mostly unbearable atrocities during the ongoing Syrian war. The production of these videos seems to have become an important part of framing collective memories of soldiers in this civil war. Watching these videos, and photos, seem to have become a common practice among Syrians of different age and backgrounds. Mobile phones enable the documentation of atrocities by those who commit them and those who discover them in an unknown manner of immediacy. One of the refugees told to us in Germany:

"*I trade mobile videos with my friends when we meet. But we are recording videos on our own too and post them on Facebook or YouTube. We share one Facebook account, which we only use for political purposes.*"

Their local production and distribution among fighters' phones or via video sharing platforms circumvent the traditional mechanisms of media aesthetics – typically applied by the mass media, such as TV stations. We saw even young children being willing to show short-term visitors from foreign countries, for instance one of the authors, the beheading of a prisoner of war. We assume that this media usage may contribute to the enormous cruelties being characteristic for this civil war.

"The majority of the videos I post are demonstrations, for example the police arrests somebody. I saw the videos with the atrocities only on YouTube, but I shared them later."
(A refugee in Germany, who wasn't politically active)

Most videos are taken with mobiles and represent the point of view of amateur cameramen, respective fighters, in an increasingly ruthless war. They use these means to tell their (war) stories about being victims themselves or about other victims (of the Assad government's mass murder).

7 CONCLUSION

Our study aims to add to the corpus of knowledge on ICT usage of political activists during the Arab Spring uprisings under destabilized and disrupted conditions. We chose the method of narrative interviews with Syrian activists, soldiers and refugees in order to gain some insight into the way in which media usage has developed and diminished as a result of background conditions and how such use is wedded to the biographies of interviewees. Here, again, narrative interviewing techniques provide a different flavor to the 'big data' story provided through the analysis of often mainly Twitter feeds. In our interviews, Twitter was rarely mentioned and seems to have been of limited use and impact, also before the civil war started. In this situation, understanding how activists and refugees obtain and disseminate news requires a more qualitative approach.

Interestingly, Assad himself made internet infrastructure widely available in Syria and it remains available in parts of the country that are controlled by his troops. The first demonstrations and protests in Syria were organized via Facebook, and social media probably played an important role in letting people know about the Arab Spring and the first mass demonstrations happening in Daraa. Nevertheless, and as we have seen elsewhere, Facebook, Twitter and even Skype activities were surveilled and used to identify political opponents. Early on, individual accounts were blocked, and later on oppositional cities or regions were cut off telecom infrastructures as a whole. Today Syria seems to be divided in government-controlled parts with fairly intact infrastructures and rebel-controlled parts without terrestrial or cabled telephone or internet access.

In the latter case, we can see the emergence of a new communication elite: rebel army officers who are equipped with satellite telephones (mainly provided by Western regimes). They are the only actors with access to communication infrastructures while the rest of the population (armed forces and civil persons) is offline. Furthermore, there is evidence that social media get also used by new actors, whose agenda is mainly unclear, e.g. different types of imams, internet journalists etc., who are specifically addressing recipients with infrastructure access in the government-controlled areas or Syrian refugees in border areas. Syrian refugees and emigrants are often well equipped with smart phones, although they are hardly able to contact relatives and friends in Syria, at least if they are living in rebel-controlled regions. To better understand the activities and the influence these Syrian emigrants, their communication practices need to be better investigated in the future.

According to our findings, relatively low tech videos of war scenes and related atrocities

play a central role in framing narratives and developments in the civil war. One feature of these videos is that their provenance is almost always unclear. In many if not most cases, it is hard to establish who shot the videos, who exactly is acting, or, in case they display atrocities, which side is responsible for them. Being widely disseminated, via mobile devices as well as via social media platforms such as YouTube or Facebook, they are serving multiple purposes: for documentation of atrocities and war crimes, for disinformation and propaganda, for humiliation and demoralizing of the enemy.

During the second phase of the study, one politically active refugee explained how sophisticated labour can be divided when producing a mobile video (in this case covering a demonstration already in the first months of the uprising):

"We divided the work on the mobile videos. I was responsible for filming, because I had a good place to view the main street, where I lived in Syria. Then I gave the memory card to another man, who was responsible for the cutting. A third one uploaded the video to a social media platform."

Future research needs to better understand how mobile videos are produced and circulated under the conditions of civil war. The interaction with (international) mass media deserves specific attention. We know from the Tunisian case that its interplay with satellite TV played a major role in enabling the uprising [22]. A's account points into a similar direction. However, here we deal with a long-lasting civil war which creates different curves of mass media attention.

Our empirical study is a small and initial contribution based on narrative interviews covering the first one and a half years of the Syrian civil war. In its methodological stance and focus on the role of ICT and mobile media, it is, to our knowledge, still a quite unique piece of work.

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