

## SANA—Syrian for Information

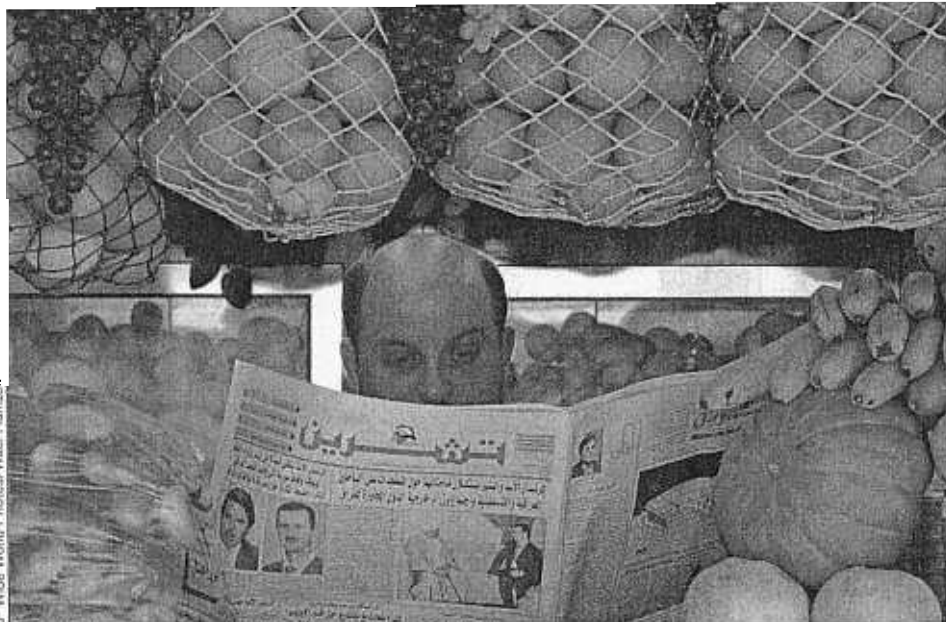
**T**HERE IS ONLY one way of bringing in information from the outside world and re-marketing it locally in Syria, and that is through the Syrian Arab News Agency, SANA. Information from [Syrian] government institutions and authorities is sent to SANA, which classifies it for publication in the press or for broadcast on television and then passes it to the media.

[Renowned intellectual] Sadeq Jalal Al-Azm said: "In a country where the press is under government control, the reader develops special skills for deciphering clues: Why was this particular word or term used or not? In order to understand what is happening, we are forced to decipher clues and draw conclusions from the use or nonuse of particular words or from how they are used, as their use is not innocent."

The former director of SANA and of the Syrian Public Authority for Radio and Television, Fayez Al-Sayigh, clarified: "President Bashar Al-Assad does not like the pompous style and prefers the neorealistic language that is appropriate for the Syrian renewal, without the pomposity that has characterized Syrian journalists' writing in the past."

Mahdi Dakhllallah, editor in chief of the ruling Baath Party daily *Al-Baath*, said: "There is no political guidance in the day-to-day handling of news items. It is subject to the editor's judgment.... These matters are examined when the editor is appointed, and so there is no need for guidelines, supervision, or direct intervention in his work."

Every political period brings with it its own media and political concepts. The appearance of these concepts in the media and the frequency [with which they appear] indicate a particular political stance. Thus, in recent years the terms "imperialism," "reaction," and "vassalage" have disappeared, to be replaced by "hegemony" and "globalization." "Civil society" has replaced the term "the society of progress and socialism." After Bashar Al-Assad's elec-



**Reader Digests** A juice-shop owner reads the government-owned *Teshreen* in Damascus, April 16, 2003. The Syrian media have to follow a rigid internal political lexicon that is issued by the government and overseen by the Public Authority for Radio and Television.

tion as president and his speech on "opinion and counter-opinion," the concepts of "political, economic, and administrative change" and "reform" infiltrated the media.

The editor in chief of the [government-owned] daily *Teshreen*, Khalaf Al-Jarrad, hinted that there was "a verbal instruction" not to use the term "reform and renewal program" too frequently, so that its use will remain realistic and logical. "I see the term 'change' as problematic because of its unclear limits—what do we change and what not?" The director of SANA, Ghazi Moussa Al-Deeb, said: "We use this term [change] in a controlled manner, so that it won't arise every time we want to indicate the building of modern Syria."

In the past three years, the opposition has raised the term "civil society" in the Arab press outside Syria, but the official Syrian press has taken care not to use it. Khalaf Al-Jarrad responds: "I have nothing against using this term as in any other country, but I am against [its abuse] by the [Syrian] opposition."

The rest of the newspaper editors agreed with him except for the late editor of *Al-Thawra*, Muhammad

Salameh, who, four years ago, opened the doors of his daily to members of the opposition. The internal political lexicon of the Syrian media does not include ethnic references. Al-Jarrad refuses to refer to any "ethnic terminology" and clarifies: "This is not due to official guidelines, but because this is how we were educated.... I try to focus on national unity because of the unceasing pressures on Syria."

In previous decades, the use of the name "Israel" in political discourse was considered treason, and the terms "the Zionist entity," "the Zionist gangs," or "the Zionist enemy" were used instead. When the Madrid conference was convened in 1991, terms became more realistic. The official media used the slogan "a just and comprehensive peace," omitting the word "lasting."

During the mid-1990s, the media discourse changed. Official Syrian television began showing Israeli officials and [former] Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin smiling. The streets of Syria were filled with billboards [with statements] such as: "Peace is Syria's strategic choice," "Fighting with honor negotiating with honor, making peace with honor," "We want a just and com-



prehensive peace,” and “Assad—hero of war and peace.” But today, the media picture is different. Al-Deeb: “How can we prepare our people for something that is not acceptable at all, because the rulers of Israel are not interested in peace at all?”

The concept “peace of the brave,” which arose in the Syrian media in the early 1990s, faded away because it was adopted by [Palestinian President] Yasser Arafat after signing the Oslo accords—which in the eyes of the Syrians included “far-reaching concessions.” The official Syrian media called it “a settlement,” not a “peace accord.” And the same thing happened regarding later peace plans: [CIA Director George] Tenet’s, [former U.S. Sen. George] Mitchell’s, and the road map, which was called a “paper” or a “plan.”

After the rise of [Prime Minister] Ariel Sharon to the premiership, the term “state terrorism” came into use. The word “Mr.” did not precede his name or the names of his ministers. The Israeli defense minister was called the “war minister” and Israel was called “the enemy” because it still occupies the Syrian Golan Heights.

In the past decade, the word “negotiations” has replaced the word “conflict” and the word “peace” has replaced the word “war.” The term “resistance” has replaced the term “armed struggle.” The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) is presented as “the Hamas movement” or as “the national resistance” without the word “Islamic,” and the same goes for Islamic Jihad, because, according to Al-Deeb, the “struggle is between all Arabs and Israel.”

Mahdi Dakhallallah, the *Al-Baath* editor, said: “It is inconceivable for us to say ‘suicide operations.’ We say ‘martyrdom’ or ‘heroism.’” Al-Deeb prefers the term “martyrdom” because “those who carry out these operations do it out of religious motivation and think that they will reach Paradise and that they are martyrs, while the term ‘heroism operation’ is secular.”

Former SANA Director Fayez Al-Sayigh said: “The official Syrian information effort has succeeded in introducing terms in the international and Arab media. The Syrian media succeeded in establishing the use of the terms ‘Rabin’s deposit,’ ‘the June 4, 1967 line,’ and ‘the basis of the Madrid conference.’ The official Syrian information effort has defeated hostile concepts such as ‘concessions,’ ‘surrender,’ and ‘retreat,’ which were replaced by ‘flexibility’ and ‘initiative.’”

Does this include linguistic recognition of Israel’s existence? Dakhallallah says: “We use the word ‘Israel’ in the framework of negotiations under international auspices, but we say ‘the Zionist entity’ and ‘state terrorism’ when we speak of Israel’s actions.” In another context, he said: “Damascus recognized the former U.S.S.R. states, even though we had relations with them only after Moscow itself recognized them.” The computers in the editorial department of *Teshreen* are programmed to automatically put “Israel” in quotation marks. Editor Al-Jarrad: “I see Israel as a plundering entity existing on the land of the Palestinian people. I do not agree to the free use of words that include any normalization or cooperation with Israel.”

Al-Sayigh notes that the use of the term “settler” [*mustawtinoun*] indicates that they live on land that is the homeland [*watan*] of others. At the same time, he advises the Syrian government media to go back to using the term “imperialistic settlers” [*musta’miroun*], which was used during the 1950s and 1960s.

Al-Jarrad forbids the use of the term “redeployment” [regarding Israeli withdrawal]. “We call this ‘moving forces,’ because it occurs in the framework of the occupation.” Al-Deeb bans the use of the terms “bilateral violence” and “ceasefire between the Israelis and the Palestinians,” as “there are no two sides.”

All the media agree on the term “racist separation fence,” because it separates the Palestinian people from the Israeli people. Al-Jarrad: “We say ‘the Zionist people,’ as Zionism is only an ideology.” The Syrian media do not say “Israeli Arabs” but “1948 Arabs,” or “1948 Palestinians,” because they do not belong to Israel.

The official Syrian media do not report on Syrian intervention in domestic Lebanese affairs, but note the “fraternal relations” between the two countries following the signing of the 1991 “cooperation, fraternity, and coordination agreement.” Similarly, “national unity,” “the Lebanese agreement,” and “the Arab role of

Lebanon” are emphasized. Hezbollah is not mentioned by name, but for the most part as “the national Lebanese resistance.”

Many observers have noted the confusion of the official media following the fall of Baghdad in April 2003. On that day, official television broadcast at length pictures of Syrian tourism sites accompanied by classical music. *Teshreen* wrote on “anarchy and obfuscation [in Baghdad],” even though Baghdad had already fallen that morning. A top Syrian media official says: “This stemmed from the fact that the media in Syria did not know what was happening, and from the fact that all the Arabs were surprised at how quickly Baghdad fell. We, as media personnel, discussed how to respond. It was agreed that we would quote the news agencies and not express an opinion.”

Al-Deeb: “SANA has a document of suggestions on how to refer to Iraq, for example, how to deal with the matter objectively and to convey the news in accordance with the international legal system. Are we headed toward war with the Americans? If so, then our media narrative is correct. But if not, why are we mobilizing the people toward this goal?” The Syrian media lexicon emphasizes “the unity of the land and people of Iraq” and “the independence and sovereignty of Iraq,” and reiterates “the end of the occupation” and “the Iraqi resistance,” without classifying it ethnically.

Dakhallallah: “We do not note the concepts ‘Shiites,’ ‘Kurds,’ and ‘Sunnis,’ rather, we present Iraqi national unity.” Al-Deeb: “SANA, and in its wake the rest of the media, do not see a problem in using the word ‘Kurds’ when speaking of figures in northern Iraq. In the south, we speak of ‘clerics’ without noting their affiliation [with the Shiites].”

With regard to the United States, Al-Jarrad says: “There is nothing wrong with the concept ‘occupation forces,’ because even the United Nations Security Council resolutions see the coalition forces as ‘occupation.’”

—IBRAHIM HAMIDI, *Al-Hayat*  
(pan-Arab), London, England,  
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