



WHAT ROLE CAN DRAMA PLAY IN CONFLICT?

A radio drama for Syria: qualitative research findings

“Hay el Matar is any street in Syria; when you listen, you feel you are inside Syria. There is some warmth about it, despite everything, and this is what I like about it.”

Rebuilding Syria's fractured society through the media

Since 2011, Syrians have been living through a war and the challenges that prolonged conflict entails. Those who have fled overseas – often as refugees – and those who have remained in the country have lost family members and their homes, lack access to education and health facilities, and are living with the daily threat of violence. In such a context, ethnic and religious divides have intensified and armed groups have been increasingly recruiting young people in Syria and neighbouring countries.¹

Syria's fractured society is mirrored in its media – outlets are controlled by the government, so-called Islamic State (IS) militants, other armed groups and the unarmed opposition. A media that reaches and resonates with the moderate majority and provides ordinary people with an impartial and balanced perspective is crucial for Syrians, who need practical assistance, and help in looking forwards to a better future and in understanding the role they can play in attaining this.

Against this backdrop, between 2015 and 2017, BBC Media Action produced and broadcast 150 episodes of the thrice-weekly radio drama *Hay el Matar* (Airport District). Funded by the European Commission as part of a broader project aiming to help build an open and inclusive society in conflict-ridden Syria, the classic soap opera aired on BBC Arabic radio and online and was accompanied by a weekly discussion programme. Set in a fictional Damascus suburb, *Hay el Matar* followed the daily lives of residents and featured love affairs, family feuds and tragedies. Each episode was scripted by a team of Syrian writers and touched on a different issue relevant to life in Syria (e.g. the ongoing civil war, migration, violence and radicalisation, economic insecurity and child or forced marriage).

Why Drama?

The media's potential to aid peace-building² is well documented, ranging from facilitating communication between opposing groups to strengthening civil society and tackling misperceptions of, and changing attitudes towards, the 'other'.^{3, 4}

Dramas and soap operas can be particularly effective because they enable audience members to put themselves in others' shoes and can address a range of pertinent issues in a compelling and emotive way. Indeed, research suggests that when audience members are highly engaged, transported by or immersed in a fictional narrative, they often experience attitude and belief change in line with those expressed in the story.⁵ In a conflict setting, by creating authentic and relatable storylines and characters from all sides, dramas can give people hope, challenge them to see opposing groups in a different light, and encourage them to discuss important topics such as the level of choice and control

people have in war. In so doing, dramas can, ultimately, influence audience members' attitudes or beliefs. Previous BBC Media Action dramas set in complex conflict environments – e.g. the *New Home, New Life* series in Afghanistan – have achieved such impact.⁶

In the context of a divided Syria, *Hay el Matar* sought to strengthen listeners' understanding of others and build a sense of shared experience. BBC Media Action believed this would lay the ground work for future peace and reconciliation in the country, and would support Syrians from different ethnic groups, regions and religions to cope with the prolonged conflict. The drama mirrored the daily challenges facing all parties living through the conflict and the options available to them through characters and storylines that listeners could emotionally invest in and follow over an extended period. It connected these through the use of a single neighbourhood setting.

Studying the impact of radio dramas in conflict settings

Although the value of media and communication in conflict situations is widely extolled, the evidence base to support such interventions is still relatively slim. BBC Media Action conducted research to evaluate *Hay El Matar* in order to understand how the drama resonated with listeners and to contribute to the nascent field of research on the role that drama can play in conflict settings.

To understand how listeners engaged with *Hay El Matar* and its impact, BBC Media Action commissioned and trained local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to conduct focus group discussions with Syrian listeners still living in Syria and some who had relocated to Lebanon. These took place three times while *Hay el Matar* was on air. Researchers asked participants about the elements of the drama they liked, their feelings about its characters and storylines, and whether they had discussed the issues it raised. Specifically, the research explored whether exposure to characters from diverse backgrounds and regions of Syria had prompted listeners to think differently, and talk about, the experiences of others also living through the war.

Conducting research in conflict settings conferred certain challenges. Firstly, the security situation in Syria made it impossible for BBC Media Action to access people naturally listening to the drama in regime-held areas. Instead, it worked through trusted NGOs operating in opposition-held areas and in refugee camps in Lebanon and asked people to listen to the drama before participating in focus group discussions.

Secondly, to avoid exposing research participants inside Syria to any danger by asking them to meet regularly, BBC Media Action asked different groups of people to take part in each round of focus group discussions. Lastly, working with people who have lived through significant trauma, disruption and displacement is difficult. BBC Media Action trained the researchers in how best to approach such an undertaking but, despite this, topics such as ethnic, sectarian and political tensions were difficult to explore with participants.

Ways drama can support people in conflict

Challenges people's perceptions of others – Assaf

Storyline: In *Hay el Matar*, Assaf is the brutal checkpoint officer who seeks to demonstrate his power and profit from his position by being firm, strong and merciless. However, he is also beholden to those in higher ranks. He is not a loyal member of the Syrian army but is purely working to support his family. Assaf's character was designed to nudge listeners to reflect on individuals' choices and actions, rather than defaulting to preconceptions of what people from different sides of the conflict are like. Specifically, he was intended to challenge people's perception of the 'other'.



Impact: This character helped listeners to reflect on and discuss how much autonomy other people living through the Syrian conflict have and his story challenged stereotypes. Some listeners empathised with him and said they had thought about what they would do if they were in his position, acknowledging that they might act similarly or even worse. However, others felt that Assaf's character was not brutal enough. In general, research participants felt connected with Assaf because they had experienced versions of him in their everyday lives (e.g. when going through checkpoints). This contributed to building a sense of shared experience, which will hopefully help to foster unity.

“ Every person has [their own] internal authority that determines [their] morality and personality. It differs between people; some have a conscience and others don't. He [Assaf] is materialistic. Maybe, if I was in his place, I would be worse. ”

Male listener, Amuda, Syria



Addresses the issue of violent extremism – Nidal

Storyline: In *Hay el Matar*, Nidal is a kind, helpful and well-meaning young man with supportive and well-respected parents. Through a series of events, Nidal becomes increasingly isolated and repeatedly humiliated. Eventually, he becomes embroiled in a plot to blow up *Hay el Matar's* checkpoint. After this, he flees and his family is ostracised by the community. Nidal's storyline aimed to showcase the range of factors that can drive a young person to violence, raise the issue of how much choice and control young people have, show the impact of such decisions on wider families and communities, and present possible alternative paths.

Impact: Nidal was one of the listeners' favourite characters – they felt he was highly authentic and reported that his journey towards violence mirrored events in their own communities. This elicited a sense of shared experience and, overall, listeners felt a high level of empathy with him and his family. Nidal's storyline successfully captured the complex range of factors that can contribute to young men becoming radicalised – isolation, rejection and the influence of others – and helped to reinforce the non-acceptance of violent extremism narratives among listeners.

“ One of the characters becomes radicalised. This is something we have experienced in our regions with the youth, so it relates to our reality ”

Male listener, Azaz, Syria



conflict, reported cases of sexual violence, exploitation, child marriage and trafficking have since increased.⁷

Impact: Overall, the storyline resonated with listeners' experiences of seeing child marriage become increasingly common in society, engaged audiences emotionally (it was deemed “touching” and “upsetting”), and reinforced their belief that early and forced marriage is a negative practice.

It prompted listeners to reflect on how much choice or control a person has within a conflict. Some male participants BBC Media Action spoke to in the research judged Hadeel's father more harshly than others; most said they would not have allowed their daughters to enter into such a marriage even if their families were at risk of becoming homeless. In contrast, most female participants acknowledged that this was a practical solution given the circumstances. They felt that marriage is sometimes a necessary solution for girls like Hadeel as they and their family struggle to survive.

“ We are all girls and we will have girls. We have to work on this issue so no girl is exposed to such injustice in the future. ”

Female listener, Atarib, Syria



Addresses sensitive issues such as child marriage and sexual violence – Hadeel

Storyline: In *Hay el Matar*, Hadeel is the 14-year-old daughter of a family that moves to the area after being displaced from another part of Syria by the war. Her father struggles to provide for his family and these economic strains lead him to arrange Hadeel's marriage to Abu Jamil, their 40-year-old wealthy landlord. This storyline was intended to highlight the increasingly pertinent issue of child marriage and some of the difficult choices that families have to make during a conflict, as well as its effect on younger people. Although child marriage in Syria was common even before the

Reflects people's own experiences and values – Shirine

Storyline: In *Hay el Matar*, Shirine, a local humanitarian worker, tries to help young people in her community who are suffering conflict-related issues and traumas. Her husband, Loqman, decides to escape the conflict by travelling to Europe and encourages her to follow him. But Shirine wants to stay in Syria to pursue her goal of supporting others, often taking stands against perceived injustices.

Impact: Promoting hope and connectedness is key to achieving effective psychosocial support in crises situations.⁸ *Hay el Matar* achieved this, in part, by creating characters whose situations and behaviours mirrored those listeners recognised from their everyday lives. For example, research participants spoke about having experienced, or witnessed their friends and family, making the same difficult decision of whether to stay or leave as Shirine and Loqman in order to survive. Similarly, listeners said they liked Shirine – and other

characters – who embodied the core Syrian value of helping others, a value passed down through generations, and reported relating to some characters' resilience and hospitality, traits they recognised in themselves.

“ I feel like Shirine because she is working in the humanitarian field. [She is like me] because I am also working and volunteering. I felt like her personality is close to mine. And, although her husband is against [her working in such a capacity], she insists on continuing. ”

Female listener, Azaz, Syria



Provides strong female characters who reflect changing norms – Arshi, Nour, Shirine and Wajd

Storyline: *Hay el Matar* was full of female characters who reflected some of the key issues facing women inside Syria, their changing role and the challenges they face. These included Arshi, the local restaurant owner who bravely stands up for herself, Nour, who overcomes opposition to launch her own business and pursues a relationship out of wedlock, Wajd, who find herself pregnant and struggles to decide whether to have her baby and Shirine (see adjacent box).

Impact: Listeners felt that the drama's strong female characters mirrored those in everyday conflict-ridden Syrian life and saw them as empowering role models. For instance, they admired Shirine and Arshi, who both took on more economic responsibility in their husbands' absence. These storylines also prompted discussion and reflection among listeners on how women's roles in Syrian society have changed because of the conflict, something that they also saw happening in their own communities.

“ This show's female characters are strong, confident and self-affirming, and hold on no matter what. In the three stories [I listened to], women proved their wit ”

Male listener, Azaz, Syria



Conclusions and implications

Hay el Matar's characters and storylines emotionally engaged listeners by successfully mirroring their own lives and experiences, from the reality of navigating checkpoints on a daily basis to seeing young men resort to violence or women take up different roles in society. The research showed that the drama prompted listeners in Syria and Lebanon to think about topical issues, challenges stereotypes and have a view of the Syrian conflict that extended beyond their own personal experience. The drama challenged listeners. It prompted them to talk about and reflect on other people's multifaceted experiences of the conflict.

BBC Media Action's use of a long-running drama format allowed characters to develop over time in a believable way, and thus for listeners to build a strong connection with them. Through this, *Hay el Matar* was able to create a sense of shared experience and connectedness, both of which are key to bringing people together and laying the groundwork for future peace and reconciliation in conflict settings.

With expanding interest in the role that creative media can play in supporting peace-building, these findings add to the growing evidence base suggesting that drama can indeed provide a safe and neutral space in which to reflect pressing social issues, address sensitive topics and bring people from different sides of a conflict together to learn about one another and promote the sense of a shared experience and future.

“ They [the Hay el Matar team] are putting the hand right on the wound. [They are successfully capturing] the things we have lived through and what is happening now. ”

Female listener, Bekaa, Lebanon

Endnotes

- ¹ Aubrey, M., Aubrey, R., Brodrick, F. and Brooks, C. (2016) *Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight: Vulnerability and resilience to recruitment by violent extremist groups in Syria – research summary* [online]. London: International Alert. Available from: http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Syria_YouthRecruitmentExtremistGroups_EN_2016.pdf [Accessed 14 March 2018].
- ² The UK Department for International Development (DFID) defines this as a “generic term that encompasses conflict prevention and resolution, reconciliation and post-war reconstruction”. Source: DFID (2000) *Working with the Media in Conflicts and Other Emergencies*. DFID report [online]. Available from: https://www.adelaide.edu.au/accru/pubs/DFID_media_&_conflict.pdf [Accessed 15 January 2018].
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- ⁸ Hobfoll, S.E., Watson, P., Bell, C.C., Bryant, R.A., Brymer, M.J., Friedman, M.J., Friedman, M., Gersons, B.P., De Jong, J.T., Layne, C.M. and Maguen, S. (2007) Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: Empirical evidence. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, 70:4, 283–315.

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- Support institutions to develop media policies, legislation and regulation that benefit the public
- Show policy-makers how media and communication can help achieve development goals

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