

In line with HMG objectives to develop professional, independent and self-sufficient local Syrian media organisations, ARK has been a key implementer of a multi-donor effort to develop a network of FM radio stations and community magazines inside Syria since 2012. To date, ARK has worked with 14 FM stations and eleven magazines based on their values, potential, geographic reach, and distribution capacity to ensure maximum range and cost-effectiveness. They range from political and satirical magazines, to Kurdish radio and a radio station with a particular focus on women's rights. International media has reported on the success of these platforms.

Alternative FM radio stations. Programming began with a combination of training and equipment provision. 'Radio in a Box' (RIAB) kits were designed by ARK in late 2012, to enable content production, live broadcast, and transmission in the field. Kits were designed to ensure portability, robustness, and ease of use in Syria, with consideration given to the fact that many teams began as media activists, not professionals. Training courses focused on the technical aspects of FM radio production and transmission, as well as ethics and media production more broadly. More than ten training sessions were held with teams throughout Syria, along with mentoring from regional journalists. Recent equipment provision has included more professional studio equipment, transmitters and rebroadcasting stations, as the teams have made technical advances. To date, ARK has provided equipment for 48 transmission sites.

Stations face challenges from shifting frontlines to extremists and regime bombardment. ARK is working to enable four stations to broadcast across wider areas from safer locations, freeing up smaller transmitters for vanguard and mobile sites. The lack of advertising markets in Syria and high operational costs mean stations remain reliant on donor funding. To address this, ARK has been developing avenues for commissioned production and paid placement. Partners remain independent, but often choose to use ARK-produced content, providing HMG with a grassroots messaging platform. Seven of the stations ARK supports recently formed an association to increase collaboration and improve cost effectiveness where possible, based on a shared code of ethics – a result of ARK's strategy to encourage longevity and independence. An independent M&E study commissioned in mid-2014 by HMG concluded that ARK-supported stations were the most popular stations in Aleppo City, Qamishli, and Kafr Nabl.

Community magazines. Similarly, after selection of initial beneficiaries, ARK support for a network of community magazines began with technical training and basic equipment provision. ARK also assisted the magazines in designing their initial lay-out and in establishing their digital presence (for example creating websites). ARK then continued to work with magazines, providing mentoring and paying stipends to cover operational costs. Funding was gradually reduced and made conditional upon placement of products, encouraging the magazines to become more sustainable. This reduced the cost to HMG, while ensuring grassroots platforms for the placement of HMG messages.

The magazines have now established numerous offices in-country to facilitate content creation, printing and dissemination. Total print runs have increased from negligible numbers in 2012 to 20-30,000 magazines a month. The independent M&E study examined five magazines, verifying distribution claims and assessing that they "were surprisingly strong in terms of circulation and were regarded as an important channel to keep people informed of local news", concluding that ARK-supported magazines were the three most popular in Aleppo City; the most popular magazine in Homs City; and the most popular magazine in Qamishli. It also consistently cited the quality of the magazine's articles. There have been numerous examples of impact; a magazine called Hentah, for example, so provoked the ire of ISIL that it burnt copies in Aleppo in 2013.