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New French-backed Syrian radio promises independent voice



Syrian journalists backed by France launched a Paris-based radio station on Wednesday that will broadcast deep into Syria, aiming to provide what they said would be independent coverage of the civil war. Apart from their military conflict, the Syrian government and rebels are waging a propaganda war using television, radio and the Internet. Access for international media is restricted by the Damascus authorities and by security constraints. "For years we were in the shadow of a media dictatorship," said Lina Chawaf, programme editor at Radio Rozana, whose Arabic name means the light that beams from a small house window. "It's very difficult for journalists in Syria to break with this, but the Syrian revolution was for freedom of expression." Five Syrian journalists, including three who have left Syrian state media, will broadcast and coordinate Rozana's coverage from 30 correspondents based across Syria. Rozana is financed by Canal France International, a French media support agency funded by France's foreign ministry and Danish media non-profit organization International Media Support. The French embassy in Syria is also providing money. France, which backs the rebels in its former colony and has demanded President Bashar al-Assad's removal, has channeled non-lethal military equipment as well as medical aid throughout Syria almost since the uprising began more than two years ago. Several former Syrian state journalists, including Ola Abbas, who presented the news on state television and radio for 15 years, have fled to France since the conflict began. Asked whether the radio could remain independent, given that it is French-based and partly French-funded, Chawaf said Rozana had no "overseas agenda" or political objective. "The priority is to hear the voice of Syrians inside Syria. They are suffering and being killed every day. We want to support them," said Chawaf, who previously ran a private radio station in Damascus dealing in part with delicate social issues. French officials say the station, which will initially broadcast by satellite for three hours a day, is not being supported to relay anti-Assad propaganda. The reporters, mostly activists in their mid-20s, have been trained by the likes of media charity Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF) in Turkey. They are based in government- and rebel-held areas of Syria, and will not be identified for security reasons. RSF places Syria near the bottom of its world press freedom index. The government controls state media content entirely, censors the internet and spreads false information, RSF says.