Any kind of research in a conflict setting is a challenge, and the current environment in Syria is no exception to this. The geopolitical polarisation in the Syrian context introduces further obstacles, particularly when researching audience engagement with the media, a sector that has largely been divided along political lines. Based on the experiences of Free Press Unlimited and the two companies who conducted the research, the following recommendations can be drawn for those wishing to conduct audience research in difficult conditions, such as conflict:

• It is vital to invest effort into ensuring the anonymity of respondents and minimizing risks to the research team, particularly in an environment of suspicion, fear and distrust, such as Syria today. To make sure respondents were at ease participating in the interviews, the research teams constantly assured them that identity and information would remain confidential. These kinds of research ethics should be put in writing, a point particularly relevant when doing research in areas where there are strong political divides.

• Security while doing research in a conflict setting is also crucial. A protocol for sharing and filing data and communicating with participants must be established before the fieldwork takes place and mainstreamed throughout the entire team involved in the study.

• An inception phase can prove to be beneficial. The month-long inception with the two research companies and Free Press Unlimited was crucial in aligning the research questions with FPU’s specific research needs.

• Using a recruitment questionnaire can prove to be very useful to obtain the desired sample of interviewees. The target of a 50% male and 50% female group of respondents can be difficult to obtain in the circumstances described. However, it was possible with the large dataset Ipsos possessed and purposive sampling used by CMC. Though purposive sampling can have disadvantages described in the methodology section (Annex 2), it did prove resourceful in order to ensure this balance.

• In future studies, include the specific needs and wishes of women in the research. Though the targeted 50/50 gender balance was reached, specific investigation into women’s needs was not explored.

• In a conflict setting, it is important to consider that some individuals do not want to participate in research or eventually decide they do not want to be included, because of fear and/or doubts. This may affect the diversity of a sample if members of a particular group – in this case women – are less prone to participate and this needs to be taken into account in the limitations analysis phase.

• Flexibility in terms of planning is needed when conducting research in an unstable environment. Researches need to re-adapt schedules and re-plan interviews when respondents are no longer available or ask to reschedule when their situation
has shifted. Commercial entities or organizations commissioning such studies need to share the same flexibility.

- In audience research, the researcher should take into account the low mental concentration capacity of participants, particularly when they are asked the same set of questions multiple times for the different items to which they have been exposed and plan interview sessions accordingly (for instance by including more breaks). If audiences get ‘bored’, this can also be a finding within itself.

- Researchers should take into account that participants in a conflict area may have experienced traumas. This may affect their ability to answer questions effectively and could mean they involuntarily omit some information.

- Follow-up for the media development sector working in Syria

Media development organizations - such as Free Press Unlimited - who are working in Syria or another conflict context, should include audience research as a fundamental part of their work. These kinds of studies are indispensable to measuring and mapping, as well as, anticipating and shaping the strategies of media development organizations. More specifically:

- Research is crucial to gain insight into audiences. Media development organizations can use this data to help outlets improve specific aspects of their coverage that their audiences value and in which they need to improve. This can help them to reach out to untapped audiences, media-dark areas and across political/conflict dividing lines, always in accordance with ethical and professional standards of journalism.

- These studies can be used to foster collaboration between media development organizations. They are beneficial in the sharing of knowledge, resources and expertise on working, for instance, with media in closed societies.

- Research is essential for media development organizations to substantiate the belief that supporting independent voices in the media is invaluable and to make the necessary adjustments to their
strategies, in order to fulfill their mission and vision.

**Recommendations for media outlets**

Research is of value to all stakeholders, including media outlets, who can use it as a guideline to further reach and engage with existing and new audiences. In a conflict context and in Syria more specifically:

- Audience research can give the opportunity to outlets to reach audiences in areas less covered or accessed. This can support them in thinking critically and developing their capacities to target and engage with these audiences. For instance, by creating ‘personas’ that represent different audience segments, whose needs and wishes can then be further researched.

- Audience research helps highlight the importance of local journalism. A more in-depth analysis of the audience panels shows that audiences are more prone to consuming items that are relevant to their areas and everyday lives, a notion that outlets can make use of when refining their editorial strategies.

- Research into audiences can help media houses build their knowledge when it comes to both operating as exiled media and accessing media-dark areas. This can involve both covering an issue and engaging with audiences and human experiences without being physically present on the ground and having to rely solely on sources.

- Outlets can use audience research data as a tool to refine their strategies, both organizational and editorial, after a careful analysis and evaluation of the work they currently produce and the audience it reaches.

- Research into audiences can test whether there is a match between the expectations of audiences vis à vis those of media outlets, when it comes to their desires and definitions of the role of the media. Where these expectations correspond, outlets can build trust with audiences and produce more audience-driven content.