SUPPORTING SYRIA’S HEROES IN THEIR STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY.

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In the future, when the fog of war finally lifts, the Syrian conflict will be viewed with the clarity that only history bestows.

Unfortunately this clarity will arrive too late for millions of Syrians whose lives have been upended by the cruel injustices they have suffered. History will reveal that beyond the complexities of the Syrian conflict with its lists of proxy powers and perpetrators, two truths stand in defiance: First, what happened in Syria was a genocide committed by the Syrian regime and its allies. Second, the international community watched as silent bystanders as hundreds of thousands of lives (if not over a million lives by the time the war is over) were lost; thousands more were disappeared; cities, towns and villages were destroyed; the country was depleted of its rich natural resources and historical artifacts; and many millions of Syrians were forcibly displaced from their homes to become refugees in nations across the world where they had one thing in common: they were not welcome anywhere.

In the future, 2017 will stand out as the year when the world truly abandoned Syria. In the years since 2011, as the violence escalated and no world power stopped the atrocities, the Syrian tragedy occupied headlines and hashtags. This coverage slowed dramatically as the media’s attention turned away from Syria after the fall of Aleppo in late 2016. Syria is no longer covered by the media as an acute crisis but as a protracted conflict—even as the chemical-laden bombs still target civilians. Conferences now revolve around rehabilitating the country, and by extension, the Syrian regime and its leader—even as its daily aerial strikes pummel Idlib, Ghouta, and Daraa. Politicians and pundits enthusiastically discuss the lucrative prospects that await with Syria’s physical and economic reconstruction—in abstract of course as no one answers the simple question: Reconstructing Syria for whose benefit? Humanitarian agencies have found their way back to operating in Damascus. It’s business as usual as they funnel “aid” once again through the Syrian regime’s corrupt channels even as this very regime continues to starve thousands of civilians to death in besieged Ghouta.

A third truth is certain: The world has failed Syria in every way imaginable. It has failed humanity.

In the future, history will also record the determined Syrian voices and actions that continued to make impact every single day. Over the past years, The Syria Campaign has emerged as the leading organization that advocates with Syrians for Syria. Our mission is to amplify and uplift the voices of these heroic Syrians who are committed to building a free, peaceful, and democratic future Syria for all Syrians.

In 2017, The Syria Campaign achieved these accomplishments across three major campaigns:

• Keeping Hope Alive: The heroic White Helmets took on the global stage after winning an Oscar. They toured the U.S. and Europe and built new networks of support across the tech giants and private donors. On the ground in Syria, the White Helmets continue to save lives after the daily airstrikes. Their team lost more than 212 members in the line of duty in 2017.

• Pushing for Peace: The fearless Families for Freedom continued to demand the release of all political prisoners from the regime’s prisons. The Syrian women behind the campaign convened in Geneva and London as they confronted the world with the images and stories of their disappeared loved ones. Today, there are more than xx Syrians who are detained in Assad’s prisons.

• Fighting for the Truth: After the chemical weapon attack in Khan Sheikhoun last April, we witnessed the rising intensity of an ongoing Russian backed disinformation campaign designed to obscure the truth of facts on the ground. Our team deconstructed the anatomy of a disinformation campaign against the White Helmets, making a brave contribution to the broader fight for the truth on Syria.

The following report details the work we undertook supporting the extraordinary efforts made by the extraordinary Syrian people who didn’t stop saving lives, demanding for freedom, and fighting the propaganda machines of the most ruthless regimes and terrorists in the world.

A sincere thank you to every one of our partners, donors, volunteers, and supporters who believe in our work and contribute to its success. Without your generous support, The Syria Campaign would not be able to advance its mission. Special thanks to The Syria Campaign Board of Directors who give much of their time and expertise to continue to build our organization as we grow in scale and impact.

Despite the darkness that consumes Syria, we move towards the future, into this new year, with hope. Our work will continue as long as there are Syrian civilians being indiscriminately killed, Syrian detainees being tortured, displaced Syrians living in hunger and in the cold, and Syrian refugees who cannot return to their rightful land. Our mission for freedom and dignity is not complete until every Syrian can live without fear, in peace, dignity, and freedom, at home.

With gratitude for your solidarity,

Lina Sergie Attar

“IN THE FUTURE, 2017 WILL STAND OUT IN PARTICULAR, AS THE YEAR WHEN THE WORLD TRULY ABANDONED SYRIA.”
IMPACT IN NUMBERS

3,182,701 MILLION
raised for Syria’s frontline heroes

98 MILLION VIEWS
of a single Facebook video we contributed to

1 OSCAR WIN
For the ‘White Helmets’ Netflix short documentary

1 DOUBLE DECKER BUS
dedicated to the release of Syrian detainees

1 UNDERGROUND HOSPITAL
funded by The Syrian Campaign members

+50 SYRIAN PARTNERS
supported by our media and communications work

56,000 SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS
analysed for our Russian disinformation report

706,653 MEMBERS
in 192 countries taking action to support Syria’s heroes

59,000 MEDIA STORIES
featuring our Syrian partners in major and popular media outlets
THE WHITE HELMETS
KEEPING HOPE ALIVE
The global headlines may have moved on from Syria following the fall of Aleppo in December 2016 but the bombs continued to fall and attacks on civilians and vital infrastructure continued with impunity, despite the announcement of so-called ‘de-escalation zones’.

From winter into spring, Idlib and Hama in the north of the country were pounded by airstrikes and 80% of White Helmet centres were bombed out of service. In April, White Helmet teams rushed to the site of the Khan Sheikhoun chemical attack that killed more than 90 civilians. Over the summer, the conflict shifted southwards with Daraa subjected to dozens of airstrikes daily, displacing thousands from their homes. The year ended with a concerted effort by the Syrian regime to recapture the Damascus suburbs, where 390,000 are living under brutal siege and subject to a relentless bombardment from the sky. In response, the White Helmets continue to save lives – 212 have now been killed in the line of duty.

In 2017, the White Helmets, also known as Syria Civil Defence, redefined the way the world viewed the Syrian conflict. The Syria Campaign worked closely with the volunteers to build broad alliances with technology, new media and entertainment, helping them to be recognised globally as the heroes that they are. By increasing their reach in this way, we raised millions of dollars, helped shape mainstream opinion and built lasting alliances with some of the most powerful people on earth.

“THE SYRIA CAMPAIGN HAS SUCCESSFULLY UNITED A BROAD COALITION OF CREATIVE PEOPLE TO BRING THE STORIES OF SYRIAN HEROES TO A GLOBAL AUDIENCE. IT’S BEEN A REAL PRIVILEGE TO WORK WITH THEM.”

— Orlando von Einsiedel, Director, ‘The White Helmets’

Winning an Oscar

In 2016, we collaborated with Orlando Von Einsiedel and Joanna Natasegara to create the Netflix film ‘The White Helmets’ – a powerful and hard-hitting examination of Syria’s rescue workers, which reached audiences around the world. The film’s Oscar nomination sparked a publicity campaign that saw the White Helmets splashed on billboards across the US, with full-page newspaper adverts and backing from celebrities such as George Clooney.

In the lead-up to the ceremony, we supported the White Helmets cinematographer Khaled Khatib’s efforts to attend the event. Unfortunately he was unable to travel due to visa restrictions but we turned Khaled’s disappointment into an international media story and the second most-read item on BBC global news on the eve of the Oscars.

On 26th February the film won the Academy Award for the ‘Best Documentary Short’ and Director Orlando Von Einsiedel read out the White Helmets’ motto onstage, asking the room to stand in support of their work.

The ceremony was watched by over 34 million people across 225 countries and ‘The White Helmets’ was the top trending search term on Google in the US.

Unfortunately the Head of the White Helmets Raed Al-Saleh was unable to attend the event due to the unrelenting attacks inside Syria but by working with him to produce a video, we used the Oscar spotlight to elevate their plea for protection of civilians, which was covered by The Guardian, BBC, Al Jazeera and others.

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“I INVITE EVERYONE WHO HEARS ME TO STAND UP AND WORK ON THE SIDE OF LIFE TO END THE BLOODSHED IN SYRIA.”

— Orlando von Einsiedel, Director, ‘The White Helmets’ reading from Raed Al Saleh’s statement
In 2017, The Syria Campaign’s work with the White Helmets focused on elevating their work and mobilising public support behind them. In addition to the Oscars, the White Helmets were recognised by two more of the most prestigious award ceremonies in the world – the TIME 100 Gala and the Emmys – marking the summation of our partnership with the volunteers since it began in 2014.

Raed Saleh was recognised as one of TIME’s 100 Most Influential People and was one of the few awardees invited to speak to a packed audience in New York alongside public figures such as Theresa May, Melinda Gates and Ivanka Trump.

And in October, Khaled Khatib attended the Emmys ceremony in Los Angeles after the documentary was nominated for two awards. We arranged visas and logistics for both trips and helped secure coverage in outlets including CNN, The New York Times, Variety and The Guardian.

“THESE TOURS HAD A HUGELY POSITIVE IMPACT FOR THE SYRIA CIVIL DEFENCE, ESPECIALLY THE MEETINGS WITH TECH COMPANIES IN SILICON VALLEY AND WITH CELEBRITIES AND GLOBAL PERSONALITIES. WE NEED TO CONTINUE AND EXPAND OUR PARTNERSHIP WITH THE SYRIA CAMPAIGN TO CEMENT THESE STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIPS FOR THE FUTURE.”

— Raed Saleh, Head of the White Helmets
In September, we organised for the Deputy Head of the White Helmets, Mounir Moustafa, and Khaled Khatib to attend the UN General Assembly in New York where they spoke at the UN’s ‘Social Good Summit’, receiving a standing ovation. We facilitated meetings with some of the most influential digital media brands including Viral Thread, Now This, Oath and the Huffington Post to help the White Helmets develop long-term content partnerships. Mounir was also welcomed by the New York Fire Department.

Keen to build support across the spectrum of power, we also introduced a small delegation of White Helmets to some of Silicon Valley’s biggest technology companies. The rescue workers attended dedicated events at companies such as Google, Facebook, Apple and LinkedIn. At these talks, employees learned about their work, expressed their support for their mission and discussed possible collaborations. We also used these trips to set up private meetings between the White Helmets and high-profile supporters.

Responding to crisis: The Khan Sheikhoun attack

In April 2017, the Assad regime launched a chemical attack on the village of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib, killing more than 90 civilians. The White Helmets were the first responders on the scene, providing a crucial testimony to the situation on the ground. We supported the team to ensure the video and photographic evidence of the attack reached as wide an audience as possible.

As well as working with traditional media, we also collaborated with the online video site Viral Thread to produce a 60-second video showing children dying from the use of sarin nerve gas. The film was seen by over 94 million people worldwide, becoming the single most viewed story relating to the attack anywhere in the world, showing that in the midst of the ongoing horror of the Syrian conflict, chemical weapons retain the power to shock the international community.

The global outcry which this, and similar media coverage, generated led to an immediate response from the US government, launching a targeted strike against the regime’s Shayrat airbase. The work of the rescue workers was recognised by the global public and an online fundraising campaign in support of their emergency response raised over one million dollars.

“WHEN IT COMES TO DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA, THE SYRIA CAMPAIGN IS ONE OF THE BEST NGOs OUT THERE. THEY’VE PROVIDED US WITH FOOTAGE THAT’S REACHED MILLIONS OF PEOPLE AND HELPED SHAPE THE PUBLIC DEBATE ON SYRIA. IT’S BEEN AN HONOUR TO WORK WITH THEM AND WE HOPE TO CONTINUE THIS PARTNERSHIP IN THE FUTURE.”

— Henry Hitchcox, Creative Director, Viral Thread
Making the case for the protection of civilians

The White Helmets have emerged as the most important Syrian civilian advocacy voice. In a crucial year for the United States, when policy was being determined by the new administration, The Syria Campaign White Helmets partnership focussed on ensuring calls for protection were heard in Washington.

During the year we organised three advocacy trips for the White Helmets, facilitating meetings with opinion formers including White House officials, over 30 elected representatives, such as Senator Bernie Sanders, Senator Marco Rubio and Minority Whip Steny Hoyer, US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley and senior Syria policymakers at the State Department. The White Helmets were able to provide officials with powerful first-hand accounts of the aerial war and explain the urgent need to stop these attacks.

Following their April trip, Rep. Kinzinger and Rep. Boyle established the first-ever dedicated bipartisan group to advance policies that promote peace, democracy, and human rights in Syria – the “Friends of a Free, Stable, and Democratic Syria Caucus”. In September, the White Helmets Deputy Head Mounir Mustafa addressed the first meeting of the caucus, conveying the reality on the ground to the most engaged US lawmakers on Syria.

Their meetings had an immediate impact on the legislative agenda, contributing to the passage of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, which puts tight sanctions on anyone supporting human rights violations in Syria. A number of members cited their meetings with the White Helmets as inspiration to vote in favour of the sanctions. The briefings also resulted in the introduction of resolution H.Res.632, which condemns attacks on hospitals and medical personnel in Syria.

In September, we supported the White Helmets to attend the UN General Assembly where Mounir Mustafa addressed an event on the accountability for war crimes in Syria, sharing the stage with the Foreign Ministers of Qatar and Liechtenstein, and joined by an audience of foreign ministers and deputies of France, Spain, UK, Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway. They also met with Syria envoys from multiple European countries and the Turkish Foreign Minister during their trip.
FAMILIES FOR FREEDOM

PUSHING FOR PEACE
The mass detention of Syria’s democrats and peacemakers is the great untold story of the Syrian conflict. There are approximately 100,000 political prisoners in Syria, with some human rights organisations putting estimates of the figure at twice that number. Detainees include leaders of the revolution, credited with inspiring many Syrians to resist both the authoritarianism of the regime and the radicalism of extremist groups. Others are ordinary citizens for whom a wrong look, a snatched conversation, or sometimes doing nothing at all, were enough of a reason for their detention.

As political negotiations loom on the horizon Syrians repeatedly state that their number one priority is advocating for the rights and freedom of the detained and disappeared. The fabric of Syrian society has been torn apart when so many Syrians – including many children – are languishing in brutal dungeons. Syrian families have said that there can be no peace in Syria until their loved ones are found and freed. For years silence and fear had dominated the issue of forced disappeared in Syria. The restart of the peace talks was a chance to push for freedom.

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"THE SYRIA CAMPAIGN HELPED US GIVE A HUMAN FACE TO THE ISSUE OF DETENTION. ITS ROLE WAS VITAL IN BUILDING THE PROFILE OF OUR MOVEMENT AND EVEN HELPING US TO GROW AS A GROUP AND SHAPE OUR DEMANDS."

— Noura Ghazi, Co-Founder, Families for Freedom

Introducing Families for Freedom

In 2016, we undertook a consultative process with Syrian civil society organisations to identify how we should engage on the issue of detention. Clear consensus emerged on the need for the issue to be elevated with international audiences. Much of the critical work to date had focussed on documentation of the horrors of imprisonment and there was a need to find a way to show hope and solutions amongst the darkness.

Each case of detention represents not only the tragic persecution of an individual but the wider punishment and censorship of their family and friends. The fear of arbitrary detention and torture is one of the Assad’s regime main tools of oppression and few dare to speak out if someone they love is at immediate risk of torture or death.

A recurring theme throughout the consultations was the role of family members left to continue life without the love and support of their partners, children, siblings. Syrian civil society organisations Dawlaty and Women Now for Development had recorded the oral histories of dozens of women with loved ones detained or forcibly disappeared. The steps the women had taken to search for their loved ones and speak up on their behalf highlighted the need to make these advocates heard.

We know that in whatever form the peace process takes, it will be these families, who know the impact of detention first-hand, who are best placed to define what a successful outcome looks like. By raising up these voices into these international fora, we stand the best chance of delivering on a sustainable and lasting peace.

When a fresh round of Geneva talks were announced in February, we scrambled to bring five influential women who were already undertaking heroic work speaking out for their loved ones in detention. We formed a partnership with Dawlaty and Women Now for Development to create the space for them to meet and plan, thereby galvanising something much greater – a network of organisers who shared the same vision to campaign for the release of every detainee. Within two days of meeting, the women had decided to work together, forming ‘Families for Freedom’. Within three days they met the UN Envoy for Syria, Steffan De Mistura who paused the talks to meet with them.

At this early stage, the new founders of Families for Freedom asked The Syria Campaign, Dawlaty and Women Now to support their movement and help elevate their work to the international community. One woman, Amina Khoulani, made the need for a global campaign clear: “Unless the world pays attention, nothing will change with this crisis.” We started work immediately.

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Left: Founding members of the Families of Freedom (Amina, Hala, Noura, Bayan, Asma, Ghada).

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Geneva and Astana talks

One of the first requests we received from the Families for Freedom was to ensure their presence at every political discussion where the issue of detention might be raised.

At the Geneva talks the concerns of Syrian civilians seemed to be all but forgotten and the Families for Freedom were determined to push the issue of detention onto the agenda. Keen not to be sidelined into the ‘NGO rooms’, the women sent a formal request to the UN Envoy for Syria, Steffan De Mistura, to formally pause the talks as a mark of respect to those detained and meet with them outside the gates. De Mistura did so. He met with them and heard their demands, pledging to read them out in the negotiation room.

We supported the women to organise a highly visual protest covered by all the major wire services, including the Associated Press and Reuters. At the same time more than 100 women across Syria held solidarity actions, raising photos of their own detained loved ones. The Guardian editor reportedly said that “the real story at Geneva is these women, not what’s happening inside the talks”.

In May we applied for visas for the women to visit Astana, Kazakhstan, where the Russian-backed talks were taking place with detainees being discussed as a military, not civilian issue. The Families for Freedom were denied a voice but insisted on being heard, issuing an open letter to the negotiators asking for the fate of their loved ones ‘not to be placed in the hands of armed men’.

They added “Of course almost every man in Syria who has fired a weapon has ensured their representation at the Astana talks. Peaceful women advocating for their peaceful family members were forced to stay at home.”

This statement demonstrated the power of Families for Freedom as a national movement, willing to criticise actors on all sides – a dynamic reflected in the makeup of the movement with the founders coming from different social, religious and political backgrounds.

"THE SUPPORT WAS BRILLIANT ON ALL LEVELS. THE BEST THING IS THEIR STRONG BELIEF IN OUR CAUSE, EVEN THOUGH THEY ARE NOT SYRIAN. FOR ME THEY ARE BROTHERS AND SISTERS AND FRIENDS, AND I WILL NEVER FORGET THEM AS LONG AS I LIVE. WHEN I CAME HOME I TOLD MY HUSBAND, MY CHILDREN AND MY FRIENDS ABOUT THEM. IF GOD ALLOWS ME TO GO BACK TO SYRIA, I WILL BUILD A STATUE FOR EACH AND EVERY ONE OF THEM."

— Amina Khoulani, Co-Founder, Families for Freedom
The Freedom Bus comes to London

Families for Freedom has a vision to influence every leader who has a role in shaping Syria’s future and securing the release of their loved ones – the first country they reached out to was Great Britain.

The challenge was how to create a striking visual for a group of women whose shared space in their home country was denied to them. The idea of the ‘Freedom Bus’ as an iconic symbol of the Families for Freedom began as a creative brainstorm within The Syria Campaign team. In the early days of the uprising, buses would be used to round up pro-democracy protesters. Many were beaten on the buses, forcibly disappeared and never heard from again. More recently, green buses were sent into besieged towns to forcibly displace residents as part of local truce agreements.

However Syrian actress Yara Sabri, famously active on the issue of detention, uses drawings of buses to symbolise the release of a detainee. The buses she draws are ones packed with friends going to pick up a detainee, delighted at the news of their freedom.

Families for Freedom agreed that the bus should become their symbol transforming it from a memory of hatred to a vehicle for hope. The ultimate hope being that their world tour will one day end outside the Damascus courthouse when they are finally reunited with their loved ones.

The journey began in October 2017 when Families for Freedom embarked on their first journey in the Freedom Bus to London. We organised an event for the women in Parliament Square, teaming up with a London choir to sing traditional Syrian songs from the open top of a red London bus, covered in framed portraits of Syrian detainees. The resulting coverage went global with coverage from the UK to Australia.

The event gave the women the opportunity to meet with the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Syria and other key political figures. They shared their stories with members of the public at an event in East London and did a series of media interviews including BBC, Vice News and The Sun.
3 FIGHTING FOR THE TRUTH
EXPOSING THE ANATOMY OF A RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN
The Syrian conflict has been subject to a Russian-led disinformation campaign to mislead the public and cover up its own war crimes. In 2017 the use of disinformation to influence global public opinion on Syria reached new and dangerous levels.

Whilst most of the individuals involved in spreading the conspiracy theories are usually dismissed as cranks and extremists by the vast majority of policy makers and opinion formers, their reach online has been extraordinary. Twitter activity during news peaks such as the Aleppo offensive in 2016 and the Khan Sheikhoun chemical attack in 2017, shows that far right groups in the United States (the so-called “alt-right”) and Russian networks are reaching more people with manufactured stories than any other group. In these key moments extraordinary focus was placed on the White Helmets in an effort to sow doubt over their credibility.

Alongside mortars and barrel bombs, the Syrian conflict has now clearly become a battle of competing narratives to shape public opinion and ultimately influence political action. Recognising the extent of the problem, The Syria Campaign launched a major investigation into the origin of the fabricated allegations against the White Helmets. We uncovered clear evidence that the Russian government was involved in orchestrating and amplifying such viewpoints.

Groundbreaking research

The Syria Campaign published ‘Killing the Truth’, a report that examined how a concerted disinformation campaign was able to dominate the reporting of one of the most important events of the Syria conflict. When nerve agent was dropped on a civilian area, Russia’s far-fetched claims were shared so widely, they became the number one trending topic on Twitter in the US.

Working with the US-based analytics firm Graphika, our research looked at thousands of social media accounts to identify patterns and evidence of an orchestrated campaign to sow doubt over the facts of the Syria conflict.

The investigation revealed how:
• A coterie of pro-Assad bloggers, including Vanessa Beeley and Eva Bartlett, are amplified by network of trolls associated with other Russian disinformation campaigns and state outlets including RT and Sputnik.
• Fifty percent of the social media accounts analysed for the report appear in at least one other known disinformation campaign, strongly suggesting a coordinated system.
• Social media firms such as Facebook and Twitter are failing to stop the deliberate and mendacious targeting of humanitarian workers such as the White Helmets on their platforms.

The report was shared by Syria experts, commentators and journalists on social media channels from The Guardian, CNN, Buzzfeed and New York Times.

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The Washington Post
The Telegraph
The New York Times
BuzzFeed
The Daily Beast
AP
Protecting the White Helmets

Although saving lives remains the White Helmets’ primary purpose, their volunteers have become one of the most important sources of documentation in the Syrian conflict, providing evidence to the UN Security Council, the media, and human rights organisations, including Amnesty and Humans Rights Watch.

This work has made them a focus for Russia’s disinformation campaign with extraordinary efforts being invested in smearing their reputation. Such online attacks are designed to cast doubts over about the veracity of their information and create suspicion around motives. The attacks were beginning to take hold and lead to a growing perception that the White Helmets were ‘controversial’.

We worked with The Guardian to support an investigation, revealing evidence of a targeted Russian influence campaign against the rescue workers. The story was shared over 15,000 times, including by key journalists and experts.

Meanwhile The Syria Campaign’s in-depth ‘Killing the Truth’ report has become the ‘go to’ source for journalists, policymakers and others who wish to investigate the extent of Russian disinformation in Syria. We hope it will serve to protect the reputation of the White Helmets for years to come.

"THE SYRIA CAMPAIGN HAS CONTINUED TO PROVIDE ESSENTIAL INFORMATION IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONFLICT IN SYRIA, IN PARTICULAR ITS INVESTIGATION INTO HOW PROPAGANDA IS BEING USED TO ATTACK ACTORS ON THE GROUND, IN AN ATTEMPT TO SMEAR THEM AND CREATE A JUSTIFICATION FOR THEIR KILLING BY GOVERNMENTS INVOLVED IN THE CONFLICT."

— Eliot Higgins, Founder of Bellingcat
4 SUPPORTING SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

BOLSTERING EXISTING EFFORTS
It is always a struggle to decide how we can best support the efforts of civil society when this conflict has produced some of the bravest, most creative and powerful peacemakers on the planet – all of whom deserve support. In 2017, we provided policy and advocacy support to medical workers and capacity building trainings to a range of partners.

**Saving lives underground**

Health facilities in Syria are systematically targeted on a scale unprecedented in modern history. Field hospitals have been driven underground into basements and caves, because of the systematic attacks on medical facilities. These fortified, underground facilities have saved the lives of patients and hospital workers. While the international community fails to protect Syrian medics from systematic aerial attacks on their hospitals, Syrians have developed an entire underground system to protect patients and medical colleagues as best they can.

Supporting the cost of these underground facilities is the number one donor demand of Syrian medical NGOs. However, the vast majority of underground facilities have been funded by private donations coming from the Syrian diaspora or various pool funds. Most donor governments consider this work to be long-term infrastructure building, not short-term protection. This outdated funding restriction was costing lives with hospitals not able to withstand aerial attacks.

Funding for underground hospitals was the number one demand for Syrian medics and, despite repeatedly raising it in donor meetings, they were not securing the shifts in funding needed to save lives. We heard the demands of Syrian partners and joined with 13 leading Syrian medical organisations – including SAMS, UOSSM, SRD, IDA, and more – to launch the report ‘Saving Lives Underground: A Case for Fortified Hospitals in Syria’.

Over a year in the making, the report helped elevate the voices of healthcare professionals and their call for better funding of such facilities. It criticised donor governments for their failure to fund underground hospitals, whilst outlining the benefits and specific opportunities for doing so.

In order to popularise the idea, we launched a multi-faceted campaign, with a dedicated website and stories in outlets such as The Sun to Foreign Policy. We worked with the UK Government to co-host an event at the United Nations, attended by more than a dozen countries, as well as supporting events at the Middle East Institute and the Atlantic Council.

Most importantly, the report was a critical tool for Syrian partners to use and continue this push.

“WITHOUT THE SYRIA CAMPAIGN WE COULD NOT HAVE DONE THIS. I CANNOT EMPHASIZE ENOUGH HOW IMPORTANT THIS KIND OF CROWDFUNDING IS, NOT JUST IN FINANCIAL TERMS BUT TO KEEP PEOPLE ACROSS THE WORLD INVOLVED AND UPDATED ABOUT THE CRISIS IN SYRIA.”

— Dr. Khaled Almilaji, head of the Sustainable International Medical Relief Organisation
“THE UNDERGROUND AVICENNA HOSPITAL WILL OFFER SECURITY TO SYRIAN
MEDICAL WORKERS WHO RISK THEIR LIVES EVERY DAY TO TREAT OTHERS.
IT WILL NOT JUST PROTECT MEDICS AND PATIENTS, BUT ALSO ALLOW
SYRIAN DOCTORS IN TURKEY TO FEEL SAFE ENOUGH TO GO BACK TO SYRIA
TO SUPPORT THEIR COLLEAGUES. THIS IS THE MOST DIRECT WAY WE CAN
PROTECT LIFE IN SYRIA RIGHT NOW.”
— Dr. Khaled Almilaji, Head of the Sustainable International Medical Relief Organisation

Crowdfunding an underground hospital
In the wait for governments to change their minds and fund
underground hospitals, the needs in Syria remained urgent as
private funding for fortification of the biggest maternity hospital
in Idlib was falling short.

Working with Dr Khaled Almilaji, the Head of the Sustainable
International Medical Relief Organisation, we launched a major
crowdfunding project in a matter of days and began to collect
donations from around the world. The campaign surpassed
its target by more than $25,000 within two weeks and the
surrounding media attention and celebrity endorsements acted
as reminder to Governments that their citizens support Syria’s
frontline heroes. The hospital is currently providing critical care
to patients in Idlib.

Trainings in communications and advocacy
The Syria Campaign receives many requests to provide direct
capacity support training to civil society groups. In 2017 we
delivered training workshops to some of our key partners: the
White Helmets, United Society of Medical and Relief Organisations
[UOSSM] and Women Now for Development. These workshops
focused on advocacy, creative communications and media.
We know from our experience that the best way to skill up
local grassroots organisations is not simply through a series
of workshops, but a combination of long-term training with the
experience of a jointly-delivered impactful public campaign. Over
and over again we have seen that the Syrian groups we work
with in these campaigns leave with a deeper desire to put their
advocacy and mobilisation skills to use in the communities in
which they operate.

Any investment in this work will greatly benefit Syria, despite the
shifting political environment. Even if violence greatly reduces and
humanitarian access is ensured, without a vibrant and skilled civil
society advocating effectively for its demands, we can have little
hope for the long-term change Syria needs. We hope to expand this
work in 2018.

“The team were amazed by the techniques and ideas, some of which
we were hearing for the first time. It was a training with impact as
it helped us make the path to our goal.”
— Shadi Alshhadeh, UGSSM-Suisse

Below: Trainings with the White Helmets in Gaziantep, Women Now in Bekka Valley and
UOSSM in Geneva

Below: The Guardian article on crowdfunding for an underground hospital.
2017 Income

- Crowd-funding £123,406
- Private individuals and foundations £711,891
- Other £8,391

Total Income £843,688

2017 Expenses

- Travel and accommodation £27,788
- Office expenses £47,557
- Technology and IT £68,059
- Professional Fees £43,200
- Fundraising and development £23,508
- Campaign £152,764
- Personal and related £576,708
- Bank fees £3,296

Total Expense £943,880
THANK YOU

We are hugely grateful to the individuals and foundations that have supported us in 2017, none of this work would be possible without them.

The Syria Campaign is independent and we have not taken money from governments or individuals linked to the violence of the conflict. All our donors have strong commitments to democracy and human rights – the values that drive our work.

We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to our board, members and those who support us, none of this would be possible without them.

We would also like to thank to team at The Syria Campaign whose commitment, creativity and courage is at the heart of everything we do.

But the deepest gratitude goes to Syria’s peacemakers and humanitarians, whose courage, creativity and resolve is an inspiration for us every day. We’re honoured to work with the very best of humanity and do so with love.
“THE DAY WILL COME WHEN THE PEOPLE OF SYRIA WILL ENJOY LEGITIMATE GOVERNANCE; WHEN THE CONSENT OF THE GOVERNED WILL DETERMINE WHO GOVERNS SYRIA AND HOW.

WHEN THAT DAY COMES, MILLIONS OF SYRIANS WILL THANK THE SYRIA CAMPAIGN FOR HAVING KEPT HOPE ALIVE DURING THE DARKEST DAYS.”

— Ambassador Frederic Hof, Atlantic Council