

Inside Syria

Max Blumenthal / AlterNet

This is Part 1 and 2 of a two part investigation into the forces cultivating Western public support for regime change in Syria.

part 1: <http://www.alternet.org/world/inside-shadowy-pr-firm-thats-driving-western-opinion-towards-regime-change-syria>

part 2: <http://www.alternet.org/grayzone-project/how-white-helmets-became-international-heroes-while-pushing-us-military>

Inside the Shadowy PR Firm That's Lobbying for Regime Change in Syria

On September 30, demonstrators gathered in city squares across the West for a "weekend of action" to "stop the bombs" raining down from Syrian government and Russian warplanes on rebel-held eastern Aleppo. Thousands joined the protests, holding signs that read "Topple Assad" and declaring, "Enough With Assad." Few participants likely knew that the actions were organized under the auspices of an opposition-funded public relations company called the Syria Campaign.

By partnering with local groups like the Syrian civil defense workers popularly known as the White Helmets, and through a vast network of connections in media and centers of political influence, The Syria Campaign has played a crucial role in disseminating images and stories of the horrors visited this month on eastern Aleppo. The group is able to operate within the halls of power in Washington and has the power to mobilize thousands of demonstrators into the streets. Despite its outsized role in shaping how the West sees Syria's civil war, which is now in its sixth year and entering one of its grisliest phases, this outfit remains virtually unknown to the general public.

The Syria Campaign presents itself as an impartial, non-political voice for ordinary Syrian citizens that is dedicated to civilian protection. "We see ourselves as a solidarity organization," The Syria Campaign strategy director James Sadri told me. "We're not being paid by anybody to pursue a particular line. We feel like we've done a really good job about finding out who the front-line activists, doctors, humanitarians are and trying to get their word out to the international community."

Yet behind the lofty rhetoric about solidarity and the images of heroic rescuers rushing in to save lives is an agenda that aligns closely with the forces from Riyadh to Washington clamoring for regime change. Indeed, The Syria Campaign has been pushing for a no-fly zone in Syria that would require at least "70,000 American servicemen" to enforce, according to a Pentagon [assessment](#),

along with the destruction of government infrastructure and military installations. There is no record of a no-fly zone being imposed without regime change following—which seems to be exactly what The Syria Campaign and its partners want.

"For us to control all the airspace in Syria would require us to go to war against Syria and Russia. That's a pretty fundamental decision that certainly I'm not going to make," said Gen. Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee this month.

While the military brass in Washington seems reluctant to apply the full force of its airpower to enforce a NFZ, The Syria Campaign is capitalizing on the outrage inspired by the bombardment of rebel-held eastern Aleppo this year to intensify the drumbeat for greater U.S. military involvement.

The Syria Campaign has been careful to cloak interventionism in the liberal-friendly language of human rights, casting Western military action as "the best way to support Syrian refugees," and packaging a no-fly zone—along with so-called safe zones and no bombing zones, which would also require Western military enforcement—as a "way to protect civilians and defeat ISIS."

Among The Syria Campaign's most prominent vehicles for promoting military intervention is a self-proclaimed "unarmed and impartial" civil defense group known as the White Helmets. Footage of the White Helmets saving civilians trapped in the rubble of buildings bombed by the Syrian government and its Russian ally has become ubiquitous in coverage of the crisis. Having claimed to have saved tens of thousands of lives, the group has become a leading resource for journalists and human rights groups seeking information inside the war theater, from casualty figures to details on the kind of bombs that are falling.

But like The Syria Campaign, the White Helmets are anything but impartial. Indeed, the group was founded

in collaboration with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)'s Office of Transitional Initiatives, an explicitly political wing of the agency that has funded efforts at political subversion in [Cuba](#) and [Venezuela](#). USAID is the White Helmets' principal funder, committing at least [\\$23 million](#) to the group since 2013. This money was part of \$339.6 million [budgeted](#) by USAID [for](#) "supporting activities that pursue a peaceful transition to a democratic and stable Syria" -- or establishing a parallel governing structure that could fill the power vacuum once Bashar Al-Assad was removed.

Thanks to an aggressive public relations [push](#) by The Syria Campaign, the White Helmets have been nominated for the Nobel Prize, and have already been awarded the "alternative Nobel" known as the Right Livelihood Award. (Previous winners include Amy Goodman, Edward Snowden and Israeli nuclear whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu.) At the same time, the White Helmets are pushing for a NFZ in public appearances and on a [website](#) created by The Syria Campaign.

The Syria Campaign has [garnered](#) endorsements for the White Helmets from a host of Hollywood celebrities including Ben Affleck, Alicia Keyes and Justin Timberlake. And with fundraising and "[outreach](#)" performed by The Syria Campaign, the White Helmets have become the stars of a slickly produced Netflix [documentary vehicle](#) that has received [hype](#) from media outlets across the West.

But making the White Helmets into an international sensation is just one of a series of successes The Syria Campaign has achieved in its drive to oust Syria's government.

Targeting the UN in Damascus

When an aid convoy organized by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs came under attack on its way to the rebel-held countryside of West Aleppo in Syria this September 18, the White Helmets [pinned blame](#) squarely on the Syrian and Russian governments. In fact, a White Helmets member was among the first civilians to [appear](#) on camera at the scene of the attack, declaring in English that "the regime helicopters targeted this place with four barrel [bombs]." The White Helmets also produced one of the major pieces of evidence Western journalists have relied on to implicate Russia and the Syrian government in the attack: a [photograph](#) supposedly depicting the tail fragment of a Russian-made OFAB 250-270 fragmentation bomb. (This account remains unconfirmed by both the UN and SARC, and no evidence of barrel bombs has been produced).

Ironically, the White Helmets figured prominently in The Syria Campaign's push to undermine the UN's humanitarian work inside Syria. For months, The Syria Campaign has painted the UN as a stooge of Bashar Al-

Assad for coordinating its aid deliveries with the Syrian government, as it has done with governments in conflict zones around the world. The Guardian's Kareem Shaheen [praised](#) a 50-page report by The Syria Campaign attacking the UN's work in Syria as "damning." A subsequent Guardian' article [cited](#) the report as part of the inspiration for its own "exclusive" investigation slamming the UN's coordination with the Syrian government.

At a [website](#) created by The Syria Campaign to host the report, visitors are greeted by a UN logo drenched in blood.

The Syria Campaign has even taken credit for forcing former UN Resident Coordinator Yacoub El-Hillo out of his job in Damascus, a false claim it was later [forced to retract](#). Among the opposition groups that [promoted](#) The Syria Campaign's anti-UN report was Ahrar Al-Sham, a jihadist rebel faction that has allied with Al Qaeda in a mission to establish an exclusively Islamic state across Syria.

A Westerner who operates a politically neutral humanitarian NGO in Damascus offered me a withering assessment of The Syria Campaign's attacks on the UN. Speaking on condition of anonymity because NGO workers like them are generally forbidden from speaking to the media, and often face repercussions if they do, the source accused The Syria Campaign of "dividing and polarizing the humanitarian community" along political lines while forcing humanitarian entities to "make decisions based on potential media repercussions instead of focusing on actual needs on the ground."

The NGO executive went on to accuse The Syria Campaign and its partners in the opposition of "progressively identifying the humanitarian workers operating from Damascus with one party to the conflict," limiting their ability to negotiate access to rebel-held territory. "As a humanitarian worker myself," they explained, "I know that this puts me and my teams in great danger since it legitimizes warring factions treating you as an extension of one party in the conflict.

"The thousands of Syrians that signed up with the UN or humanitarian organizations are civilians," they continued. "They not only joined to get a salary but in hopes of doing something good for other Syrians. This campaign [by The Syria Campaign] is humiliating all of them, labelling them as supporters of one side and making them lose hope in becoming agents of positive change in their own society."

This September, days before the aid convoy attack prompted the UN to suspend much of its work inside Syria, The Syria Campaign spurred 73 aid organizations operating in rebel-held territory, including the White Helmets, to suspend their cooperation with the UN aid program. As the Guardian [noted](#) in its coverage, "The decision to withdraw from the Whole of Syria programme, in which organisations share information to help the de-

livery of aid, means in practice the UN will lose sight of what is happening throughout the north of Syria and in opposition-held areas of the country, where the NGOs do most of their work.”

Despite The Syria Campaign’s influence on the international media stage, details on the outfit’s inner workings are difficult to come by. The Syria Campaign is registered in England as a private company called the Voices Project at an address shared by [91 other companies](#). Aside from Asfari, most of The Syria Campaign’s donors are anonymous.

Looming over this opaque operation are questions about its connections to [Avaaz](#), a global public relations outfit that played an instrumental role in generating support for a no-fly zone in Libya, and The Syria Campaign’s founding by Purpose, another PR firm spun out of Avaaz. James Sadri bristled when I asked about the issue, dismissing it as a “crank conspiracy” ginned up by Russian state media and hardcore Assadist elements.

However, a careful look at the origins and operation of The Syria Campaign raises doubts about the outfit’s image as an authentic voice for Syrian civilians, and should invite serious questions about the agenda of its partner organizations as well.

A creation of international PR firms

Best known for its work on liberal social issues with well-funded progressive clients like the ACLU and the police reform group, Campaign Zero, the New York- and London-based public relations firm Purpose promises to deliver creatively executed campaigns that produce either a “behavior change,” “perception change,” “policy change” or “infrastructure change.” As the Syrian conflict entered its third year, this company was ready to effect a regime change.

On Feb. 3, 2014, Anna Nolan, the senior strategist at Purpose, posted a [job listing](#). According to Nolan’s listing, her firm was seeking “two interns to join the team at Purpose to help launch a new movement for Syria.”

At around the same time, another Purpose staffer named Ali Weiner posted a job listing seeking a paid intern for the PR firm’s new Syrian Voices project. “Together with Syrians in the diaspora and NGO partners,” Weiner [wrote](#), “Purpose is building a movement that will amplify the voices of moderate, non-violent Syrians and mobilize people in the Middle East and around the world to call for specific changes in the political and humanitarian situation in the region.” She explained that the staffer would report “to a Strategist based primarily in London, but will work closely with the Purpose teams in both London and New York.”

On June 16, 2014, Purpose founder Jeremy Heimans drafted articles of association for The Syria Campaign’s parent company. Called the [Voices Project](#), Heimans registered the company at 3 Bull Lane, St. Ives Cam-

bridgeshire, England. It was one of 91 private limited companies [listed](#) at the address. Sadri would not explain why The Syria Campaign had chosen this location or why it was registered as a private company.

Along with Heimans, Purpose Europe director Tim Dixon was appointed to The Syria Campaign’s board of directors. So was John Jackson, a Purpose strategist who previously co-directed the Burma Campaign U.K. that lobbied the EU for sanctions against that country’s ruling regime. (Jackson [claimed credit](#) for The Syria Campaign’s successful push to remove Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad’s re-election campaign ads from Facebook.) Anna Nolan became The Syria Campaign’s project director, even as she [remained listed](#) as the strategy director at Purpose.

“Purpose is not involved in what we do,” The Syria Campaign’s Sadri told me. When pressed about the presence of several Purpose strategists on The Syria Campaign’s board of directors and staff, Sadri insisted, “We’re not part of Purpose. There’s no financial relationship and we’re independent.”

Sadri dismissed allegations about The Syria Campaign’s origins in Avaaz. “We have no connection to Avaaz,” he stated, blaming conspiratorial “Russia Today stuff” for linking the two public relations groups.

However, Purpose’s original job listing for its Syrian Voices project boasted that “Purpose grew out of some of the most impactful new models for social change” including “the now 30 million strong action network [avaaz.org](#).” In fact, The Syria Campaign’s founder, Purpose co-founder Jeremy Heimans, was also one of the original founders of Avaaz. As he [told](#) Forbes, “I co-founded Avaaz and [the Australian activist group] Get Up, which inspired the creation of Purpose.”

New and improved no-fly zone

The Syria Campaign’s defensiveness about ties to Avaaz is understandable.

Back in 2011, Avaaz introduced a public campaign for a no-fly zone [in Libya](#) and delivered a petition with 1,202,940 signatures to the UN supporting Western intervention. John Hilary, the executive director of War On Want, the U.K.’s leading anti-poverty and anti-war charity, [warned](#) at the time, “Little do most of these generally well-meaning activists know, they are strengthening the hands of those western governments desperate to reassert their interests in north Africa. . . . Clearly a no-fly zone makes foreign intervention sound rather humanitarian—putting the emphasis on stopping bombing, even though it could well lead to an escalation of violence.”

John Hilary’s dire warning was fulfilled after the NATO-enforced no-fly zone prompted the ouster of former President Moamar Qaddafi. Months later, Qaddafi was sexually assaulted and beaten to death in the road by a mob of fanatics. The Islamic State and an assortment of

militias filled the void left in the Jamahiriya government's wake. The political catastrophe should have been serious enough to call future interventions of this nature into question. Yet Libya's legacy failed to deter Avaaz from introducing a new campaign for [another no-fly zone](#); this time in Syria.

"To some a no-fly zone could conjure up images of George W. Bush's foreign policy and illegal Western interventions. This is a different thing," Avaaz insisted in a communique defending its support for a new no-fly zone in Syria. Sadri portrayed The Syria Campaign's support for a no-fly zone as the product of a "deep listening process" involving the polling of Syrian civilians in rebel-held territories and refugees outside the country. He claimed his outfit was a "solidarity organization," not a public relations firm, and was adamant that if and when a no-fly zone is imposed over Syrian skies, it would be different than those seen in past conflicts.

"There also seems to be a critique of a no-fly zone which is slapping on templates from other conflicts and saying this is what will happen in Syria," Sadri commented. He added, "I'm just trying to encourage us away from a simplistic debate. There's a kneejerk reaction to Syria to say, 'It's Iraq or it's Libya,' but it's not. It's an entirely different conflict."

Funding a "credible transition"

For the petroleum mogul who provided the funding that launched the Syria Project, the means of military intervention justified an end in which he could return to the country of his birth and participate in its economic life on his own terms.

Though The Syria Campaign claims to "refuse funding from any party to the conflict in Syria," it was founded and is sustained with generous financial assistance from one of the most influential exile figures of the opposition, Ayman Asfari, the U.K.-based CEO of the British oil and gas supply company Petrofac Limited. Asfari is worth \$1.2 billion and owns about one-fifth of the shares of his company, which boasts 18,000 employees and [close to \\$7 billion](#) in annual revenues.

Through his Asfari Foundation, he has contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to The Syria Campaign and has secured a seat for his wife, Sawsan, on its board of directors. He has also been a top financial and political supporter of the Syrian National Coalition, the largest government-in-exile group set up after the Syrian revolt began. The group is dead-set on removing Assad and replacing him with one of its own. Asfari's support for opposition forces was so pronounced the Syrian government filed a [warrant](#) for his arrest, accusing him of supporting "terrorism."

In London, Asfari has been a major donor to former British Prime Minister David Cameron and his Conservative Party. This May, Cameron [keynoted](#) a fundraiser for

the Hands Up for Syria Appeal, a charity heavily supported by Asfari that sponsors education for Syrian children living in refugee camps. The Prime Minister might have seemed like an unusual choice for the event given his staunch [resistance](#) to accepting unaccompanied Syrian children who have fled to Europe. However, Asfari has generally supported Cameron's exclusionary policy.

Grilled about his position during an episode of BBC's [Hardtalk](#), Asfari explained, "I do not want the country to be emptied. I still have a dream that those guys [refugees] will be able to go back to their homes and they will be able to play a constructive role in putting Syria back together."

In Washington, Asfari is regarded as an important liaison to the Syrian opposition. He has visited the White House eight times since 2014, meeting with officials like Philip Gordon, the former Middle East coordinator who was an early advocate for arming the insurgency in Syria. Since leaving the administration, however, Gordon has expressed regret over having embraced a policy of regime change. In a lengthy September 2015 editorial for *Politico*, Gordon [slammed](#) the Obama administration's pursuit of regime change, writing, "There is now virtually no chance that an opposition military 'victory' will lead to stable or peaceful governance in Syria in the foreseeable future and near certainty that pursuing one will only lead to many more years of vicious civil war."

Asfari publicly chastised Gordon days later on *Hardtalk*. "I have written to [Gordon] an email after I saw that article in *Politico* and I told him I respectfully disagree," Asfari remarked. "I think the idea that we are going to have a transition in Syria with Assad in it for an indefinite period is fanciful. Because at the end of the day, what the people want is a credible transition."

For Asfari, a "credible" post-war transition would require much more than refugee repatriation and the integration of opposition forces into the army: "Will you get the Syrian diaspora, including people like myself, to go back and invest in the country?" he asked on *Hardtalk*. "... If we do not achieve any of these objectives, what's the point of having a free Syria?"

The Independent has [described](#) Asfari as one among of a pantheon of "super rich" exiles poised to rebuild a post-Assad Syria — and to reap handsome contracts in the process. To reach his goal of returning to Syria in triumph after the downfall of Assad's government, Asfari not only provided the seed money for The Syria Campaign, he has helped sustain the group with hefty donations.

Just this year, the Asfari Foundation donated \$180,000 to the outfit, according to The Syria Campaign's media lead Laila Kiki. Asfari is not The Syria Campaign's only donor, however. According to Kiki, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund also contributed \$120,000 to the outfit's \$800,000 budget this year. "The rest of

the funds come from donors who wish to remain anonymous," she explained.

Shaping the message

Among The Syria Campaign's main priorities, for which it has apparently budgeted a substantial amount of resources, is moving Western media in a more interventionist direction.

When The Syria Campaign placed [an ad](#) on its website seeking a senior press officer upon its launch in 2014, it emphasized its need for "someone who can land pieces in the U.S., U.K. and European [media] markets in the same week." The company's ideal candidate would be able to "maintain strong relationships with print, broadcast, online journalists, editors in order to encourage them to see TSC as a leading voice on Syria." Prioritizing PR experience over political familiarity, The Syria Campaign reassured applicants, "You don't need to be an expert on Syria or speak Arabic." After all, the person would be working in close coordination with an unnamed "Syrian communications officer who will support on story gathering and relationships inside Syria."

Sadri acknowledged that The Syria Campaign has been involved in shopping editorials to major publications. "There have been op-eds in the past that we've helped get published, written by people on the ground. There's a lot of op-eds going out from people inside Syria," he told me. But he would not say which ones, who the authors were, or if his company played any role in their authorship.

One recent incident highlighted The Syria Campaign's skillful handling of press relationships from Aleppo to media markets across the West. It was August 17, and a Syrian or Russian warplane had just hit an apartment building in rebel-held eastern Aleppo. Sophie McNeill, a Middle East correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, [received](#) a photo from the Syrian American Medical Society, which maintains a WhatsApp group networking doctors inside rebel territory with international media.

The photo showed a five-year-old boy, Omran Daqneesh, who had been extracted from the building by members of the White Helmets and hoisted into an ambulance, where he was filmed by members of the Aleppo Media Center. The chilling image depicts a dazed little boy, seated upright and staring at nothing, his pudgy cheeks caked in ash and blood. "Video then emerged of Omran as he sat blinking in the back of that ambulance," McNeill [wrote](#) without explaining who provided her with the video. She immediately posted the footage on Twitter.

"Watch this video from Aleppo tonight. And watch it again. And remind yourself that with #Syria #wecantsaywedidntknow," McNeill [declared](#). Her post was retweeted over 17,000 times and the hashtag she originated, which implied international inaction against the

Syrian government made such horrors possible, became a viral sensation as well. (McNeill did not respond to questions sent to her publicly listed email.)

Hours later, the image of Omran appeared on the front page of dozens of international newspapers, from the New York Times to the Wall Street Journal to the Times of London. CNN's Kate Bolduan, who had [suggested](#) during Israel's bombardment of the Gaza Strip in 2014 that civilian casualties were, in fact, human shields, broke down in tears during an extended segment detailing the rescue of Omran.

Abu Sulaiman Al-Muhajir, the Australian citizen serving as a top leader and spokesman for Al Qaeda's Syrian offshoot, Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham, took a special interest in the boy. "I cannot get conditioned to seeing injured/murdered children," Al-Muhajir [wrote](#) on Facebook. "Their innocent faces should serve as a reminder of our responsibility."

Seizing on the opportunity, The Syria Campaign gathered quotes from the photographer who captured the iconic image, Mahmoud Raslan, and furnished them to an array of media organizations. While many outlets published Raslan's statements, [Public Radio International](#) was among the few that noted The Syria Campaign's role in serving them up, referring to the outfit as "a pro-opposition advocacy group with a network of contacts in Syria."

On August 20, McNeill [took to Facebook](#) with a call to action: "Were you horrified by the footage of little Omran?" she asked her readers. "Can't stop thinking about him? Well don't just retweet, be outraged for 24 hours and move on. Hear what two great humanitarians for Syria, Zaher Sahloul & James Sadri, want you to do now."

Sadri happened to be the director of The Syria Campaign and Sahloul was the Syrian American Medical Society director who [partnered](#) with The Syria Campaign. In the article McNeill wrote about Omran's photo, which was linked in her Facebook post, both Sahloul and Sadri urged Westerners to join their call for a no-fly zone—a policy McNeill tacitly endorsed. (Sahloul was recently [promoted](#) by the neoconservative columnist Eli Lake for accusing Obama of having "allowed a genocide in Syria." This September, Sahloul [joined up](#) with the Jewish United Federation of Chicago, a leading opponent of Palestine solidarity organizing, to promote his efforts.)

As the outrage inspired by the image of Omran spread, New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof (a [friend](#) and [publisher](#) of Syria Campaign board member Lina Sergie Attar) [called for](#) "fir[ing] missiles from outside Syria to crater [Syrian] military runways to make them unusable." Meanwhile, on MSNBC's Morning Joe, host Joe Scarborough waved around the photo of Omran and indignantly [declared](#), "The world will look back. Save your hand-wringing... you can still do something

right now. But nothing's been done."

As breathless editorials and cable news tirades denounced the Obama administration's supposed "inaction," public pressure for a larger-scale Western military campaign was approaching an unprecedented level.

Damage control for opposition extremists

The day after Omran made headlines, the left-wing British news site the Canary publicized another photograph that exposed a grim reality behind the iconic image.

Culled from the Facebook page of Mahmoud Raslan, the activist from the American-operated Aleppo Media Center who took the initial video of Omran, it showed Raslan posing for a [triumphant selfie](#) with a group of rebel fighters. The armed men hailed from the Nour Al-Din Al-Zenki faction. At least two of the commanders who appeared in the photo with Raslan had recently beheaded a boy they captured, referring to him in video footage as "child" while they taunted and abused him. The boy has been [reported](#) to be a 12-year-old named Abdullah Issa and may have been a member of the Liwa Al-Quds pro-government Palestinian militia.

This was not the only time Raslan had appeared with Al-Zenki fighters or expressed his sympathy. On August 2, he posted a selfie to Facebook depicting himself surrounded by mostly adolescent Al-Zenki fighters dressed in battle fatigues. "With the suicide fighters, from the land of battles and butchery, from Aleppo of the martyrs, we bring you tidings of impending joy, with God's permission," Raslan wrote. He sported a headband matching those worn by the "suicide fighters."

Despite its unsavory tendencies and extremist ideological leanings, Al-Zenki was until 2015 a recipient

of extensive American funding, with at least 1000 of its fighters on the CIA payroll. Charles Lister, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute who [has said](#) his research on the Syrian opposition was "100% funded by Western govts," has [branded](#) Al-Zenki as "moderate opposition fighters."

This August, after the video of Al-Zenki members beheading the adolescent boy appeared online, Sam Heller, a fellow for the Washington-based Century Foundation, [argued](#) for restoring the rebel group's CIA funding. Describing Al-Zenki as "a natural, if unpalatable, partner," Heller contended that "if Washington insists on keeping its hands perfectly clean, there's probably no Syrian faction—in the opposition, or on any side of the war—that merits support."

This September 24, Al-Zenki formally [joined forces](#) with the jihadist Army of Conquest led by Al Qaeda-established jihadist group, Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham. For its part, The Syria Campaign coordinated the release of a statement with Raslan explaining away his obvious affinity with Al-Zenki. Sophie McNeill, the Australian Broadcasting Corp. reporter who was among the first to publish the famous Omran photo, dutifully published Raslan's [statement](#) on Twitter, acknowledging The Syria Campaign as its source.

Curiously describing the beheading victim as a 19-year-old and not the "child" his beheaders claimed he was, Raslan pleaded ignorance about the Al-Zenki fighters' backgrounds: "It was a busy day with lots of different people and groups on the streets. As a war photographer I take lots of photos with civilians and fighters."

Mahmoud Raslan may not have been the most effective local partner, but The Syria Campaign could still count on the White Helmets.

How the White Helmets Became International Heroes While Pushing U.S. Military Intervention and Regime Change in Syria

It is rare for a short Netflix documentary to garner as much publicity or acclaim as *The White Helmets* has. [Promoted](#) as "the story of real-life heroes and impossible hope," the film is named for the civil defense organization whose members have gained international acclaim for saving lives in rebel-held territory in the hellish war zones of eastern Aleppo and Idlib. The film's tagline, "To save one life is to save all of humanity," that is remarkably similar to that of Steven Spielberg's Holocaust epic, [Schindler's List](#): "Whoever saves one life, saves the world entire."

The Netflix feature comes on the heels of a Nobel Peace Prize nomination for the White Helmets, an "alternative Nobel" award known as the Right Livelihood Award and endorsements from an assortment of celebrities. "The move [by the celebrities] draws attention to

both the horror of the conflict and the growing willingness of well-known Americans to adopt it as a cause célèbre," [wrote](#) Liam Stack of the New York Times.

Footage of the White Helmets saving civilians trapped in the rubble of buildings bombed by the Syrian government and its Russian ally has become ubiquitous in coverage of the crisis. An international symbol of courage under fire, the group has become a leading resource for journalists and human rights groups seeking information inside the war theater, from casualty figures to details on the kind of bombs that are falling.

The bravado displayed by the White Helmets under Syrian government and Russian bombardment has [captivated](#) some of the most influential observers of the Syrian conflict. Among the group's biggest boosters is Sophie McNeill, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation corre-

spondent who was among the first reporters to publish the now-famous photo of 5-year-old Omran Daqneesh being extracted from the rubble of an Eastern Aleppo apartment building.

On her Twitter account, McNeill [urged](#) readers to donate money to the White Helmets and [expressed](#) her hope that the group wins the Nobel Prize. (McNeill did not respond to questions sent to her publicly listed email.) Laura Rosenberger, a foreign policy adviser to Hillary Clinton, also took to Twitter to [promote](#) the group, posting a Wall Street Journal article hailing the civil defense group as “white knights for desperate Syrians.” Hillary Clinton quickly [retweeted](#) Rosenberger, registering her own tacit endorsement of the White Helmets. On September 22, Secretary of State John Kerry [declared](#) that he was “honored to meet [the White Helmets] leader and Aleppo activists,” hailing the organization as “brave 1st responders on the scene.”

The White Helmets are touted for saving tens of thousands of lives, though estimates on exactly how many varies dramatically depending on the source. The recently released White Helmets’ Netflix documentary claims they’ve saved “over 55,000” people, while Georgetown Security Studies Review had the [number](#) at 15,500 in May 2015. The State Department [claimed](#) this April that 40,000 had been rescued by White Helmets, but AJ+, a subsidiary of Al Jazeera, [asserted](#) around the same time that “more than 24,000” have been saved.” In a [separate report](#) published four months later, AJ+ quoted the figure at 60,000—which is the figure the White Helmets themselves claim. Whatever the number, there is little dispute that the White Helmets’ rank-and-file are saving lives in what seems to be an increasingly desperate situation in eastern Aleppo.

Yet the group is anything but impartial. The White Helmets’ leadership is driven by a pro-interventionist agenda conceived by the Western governments and public relations groups that back them. Anyone who visits the group’s [website](#)—which is operated by an opposition-funded PR company known as [the Syria Campaign](#)—will be immediately directed to a request to sign a petition for a no-fly zone to “stop the bombs” in Syria. These sorts of communiques highlight the dual role the White Helmets play as a civil defense organization saving lives while lobbying for a U.S. military campaign that will almost inevitably result in the collapse of Syria’s government.

According to a 2012 [Pentagon estimate](#), a no-fly zone would require at least “70,000 American servicemen” to enforce, along with the widespread destruction of Syrian government infrastructure and military installations. Also sometimes called “safe zones” or “buffer zones,” from Yugoslavia to Iraq to Libya, no-fly zones have served almost without exception as the preamble to regime change. With no clear plan in place for the day after the government falls, or any conclusive evidence that its ouster is

what most Syrians want, the Western governments, professional activists and public relations specialists who created the White Helmets are intensifying their push for regime change.

The White Helmets were founded in collaboration with USAID’s Office of Transitional Initiatives—the wing that has promoted regime change around the world—and have been provided with \$23 million in funding from the department. USAID supplies the White Helmets through Chemonics, a for-profit contractor based in Washington DC that has become notorious for wasteful aid imbroglios from Haiti to Afghanistan. While members of the White Helmets have been implicated in atrocities carried out by jihadist rebel groups, the names of many of the firms that supposedly monitor and evaluate their work have been kept secret by USAID on unspecified security grounds.

Away from the battlefield, the White Helmets have proven one of the most effective tools in the Syria Campaign’s public relations arsenal. Apart from the group’s own calls for a no-fly zone, the White Helmets have been at the center of the Syria Campaign’s [ongoing attack](#) on the United Nations, which it accuses of illicit collusion with Assad. This month, the White Helmets joined 74 other groups operating in rebel-held territory announced their [refusal](#) this month to cooperate with the U.N. as long as it recognizes the Syrian government. In a separate [move](#), the Syria Campaign launched a petition to demand that the United States National Security Council share confidential radar information with White Helmets teams operating on the ground, apparently including in areas controlled by extremist rebel factions.

In May 2015, White Helmets spokesperson Raed Saleh [met privately](#) with U.N. and EU officials to push for a no-fly zone. A month later, Saleh’s colleague Farouq Habib [testified](#) before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs in support of a no-fly zone, claiming to possess first-hand knowledge of chemical weapons attacks by the Syrian government. With the Obama administration having drawn its “red line” at the deployment of chemical weapons, allegations like these are potential trigger points for full-scale U.S. military intervention.

The White Helmets’ Netflix documentary studiously avoids any discussion of the group’s interventionist, hyper-partisan agenda and omits any mention of its actual origins among Western governments, leaving the impression that the White Helmets are an organically developed band of politically impartial volunteers reflecting the Syrian consensus.

Critical questions about the White Helmets’ role in an interventionist public relations apparatus have been raised by only a few marginal websites that generally support the Syrian government -- and those who raise them have been subjected to scorn and castigation. Thus the issue has been kept off the table, along with the public

debate over the consequences of a regime change policy that the Obama administration still supports.

The White Helmets in Washington

This September 27, while White Helmets members dug survivors and bodies from the ruins of buildings in the rebel-held warzone of eastern Aleppo, two of the group's public representatives appeared in Washington for a series of events and high-level meetings. The first event open to the public was held at the Atlantic Council, an influential think tank with close ties to the Obama administration, and took place under the banner of the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, which is named for and funded by the family of the assassinated former Lebanese Prime Minister who amassed his fortune through business ties to the Saudi royal family. (Rafik's son, Saad, blames the Syrian government for killing his father and creating ISIS and has effectively called for its removal.)

Presiding over *The White Helmets* reception was Frederick Hof, the director of the Hariri center, a former adviser to Hillary Clinton on Syrian "transition" and a longtime State Department envoy in the Middle East. Hof has said his focus on Syria at the State Department was motivated by the prospect of "beating Hezbollah and its Iranian master," a goal he found "inspiring." As he introduced *The White Helmets*, Hof accused Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad of committing war crimes with impunity and demanded that his government pay a "heavy price."

While conceding that a no-fly zone was not a feasible option because it would subject the U.S. Air Force to Syria's anti-aircraft systems, Hof told me he preferred cruise missile strikes against Syrian military installations and arming the rebels with Manpad shoulder-mounted anti-aircraft missiles. When I asked if he feared such sophisticated weapons falling into the hands of Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham or Ahrar Al-Sham, the jihadist groups that boast the most manpower and battlefield prowess, Hof accused me of ignorance about the Defense Department's foolproof vetting mechanisms.

After a screening of the trailer for *The White Helmets*, Hof introduced the civil defense group as a heroic and absolutely "impartial" party to the conflict. He then welcomed Saleh, the White Helmets spokesman, to the stage. "Our demand is not for support to continue the work of the White Helmets, rather our demand is to stop the killing itself so that we don't have to continue this awful job," Saleh said.

Seated beside Saleh and providing live translation was Kenan Rahmani, a legal and strategy adviser to the Syria Campaign. As I reported in Part 1 of this series, the Syria Campaign is a private company founded by a New York- and London-based public relations firm called Purpose in order to generate public pressure for the removal of Syria's government. It led the push for the

White Helmets' Nobel Prize nomination, orchestrated the group's endorsements from Hollywood celebrities and has fundraised for its Netflix documentary vehicle.

Rahmani, for his part, was a policy adviser to the Coalition for a Democratic Syria, a umbrella organization of exile groups with close ties to the Syrian rebels and neoconservative organizations in Washington, before he took his current job at the Syria Campaign. When I asked Saleh how the White Helmets' demand for a no-fly zone fit with its claim to uphold impartiality, Rahmani interjected to defend his company's work.

"Of course we are an impartial, non-political organization," he said. "The Syria Campaign doesn't take political sides but our position is a no-fly zone would stop the suffering, would stop the destruction." Saleh of the White Helmets followed up with his own call for a no fly zone, telling me that if I understood the scale of destruction in Syria, I would agree with his demand.

Moments after the panel discussion ended, Rahmani approached me to complain about my line of questioning. "These people [the White Helmets] are saving lives," he began. But before he could complete his sentence, Rahmani was whisked away by Anna Nolan, the Purpose firm's director of strategy who oversaw the Syria Campaign's foundation. From that point on, Rahmani refused to speak to me.

Seated in the front row throughout the event was Ayman Asfari, one of the main funders of the Syria Campaign and a top exile supporter of the Syrian opposition. The billionaire CEO of the petroleum services company Petrofac, Asfari contributed \$180,000 of the Syria Campaign's \$800,000 budget this year. (Most of the company's donors are anonymous.)

I approached Asfari on his way out to ask how long he planned to continue directing his fortune toward promoting regime change. "There is a political process, which is a transition. We just want to bring back the transition," he said before disappearing into an elevator. In a few hours, Asfari would host a screening of *The White Helmets* at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The White Helmets' founding fathers

Supporters of heightened U.S. military intervention in Syria routinely accuse President Barack Obama of not doing enough to support the forces fighting the Syrian government. James Traub, a leading liberal voice of interventionism, has repeatedly claimed over the past five years that the U.S. is "doing nothing" in Syria and paying a terrible price for it. But together with the \$1 billion the CIA has spent on arming and training the rebels, a close look at the hundreds of millions of dollars the U.S. Agency for International Development has spent in Syria on projects including the White Helmets tells a different story.

Back in July 2012, a year after the Syrian conflict began, USAID began to lay the groundwork for its Syrian Regional Option. With American analysts excitedly proclaiming the imminent downfall of Bashar Al-Assad and his government, USAID rushed to “provide support to emerging civil authorities to build the foundation for a peaceful and democratic Syria,” according to a USAID executive report from that year.

The grants were authorized by USAID’s Office of Transitional Initiatives (OTI), spearheading efforts to encourage what proponents like to call “democracy promotion” in countries like Cuba and Venezuela, but which amount to failed attempts at regime change. In Cuba, USAID’s OTI caused an embarrassing diplomatic incident in 2014 when it was [exposed](#) for funding a program aimed at spawning instability and undermining the government through a Twitter-like social network called Zunzuneo.

Following a series of pilot programs carried out by a for-profit, Washington DC-based contractor called Development Alternatives International (DAI) at a cost of \$290,756 to U.S. taxpayers, the OTI began setting up local councils in rebel-held territory in Syria. The idea was to establish a parallel governing structure in insurgent-held areas that could one day supplant the current government in Damascus. According to its 2012 USAID executive summary on the Syria Regional Option ([PDF](#)), “foreign extremist entities” already held sway across the country.

In March 2013, a former British infantry officer named James Le Mesurier turned up on the Turkish border of Syria. Le Mesurier was a [veteran](#) of NATO interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo who moved into the lucrative private mercenary industry after his army days ended. But running security for the UAE’s oil and gas fields left him feeling unfulfilled with his career as a hired gun. He wanted to be a part of something more meaningful. So he became a lead participant in USAID’s Syria Regional Option.

Le Mesurier’s job was to organize a unique band of people who rush into freshly bombed buildings to extract survivors—while filming themselves—in rebel-held areas facing routine bombing by Syrian army aircraft. In 2014, he established Mayday Rescue, a non-profit based in Turkey that [grew out of](#) the Dubai-based “research, conflict transformation, and consultancy” firm known as Analysis, Research, and Knowledge, or ARK. That group, which employed Le Mesurier while overseeing the White Helmets’ training, has been sustained through [grants](#) from Western governments and the British Ministry of Defense. Mayday Rescue, for its part, received around \$300,000 in initial funding from the U.S. Department of State to assist in training the first responders. Though they were known as Syrian Civil Defense, graduates of Le Mesurier’s course became popularly identified by the signature headgear they wore in the field: White

Helmets.

Since being founded under the watch of Mayday Rescue, the White Helmets have received grants worth millions of dollars from the [U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office](#), Japan and USAID. To date, USAID has donated [\\$23 million](#) to the White Helmets, a substantial sum for a civil defense project in a war zone.

Mark Ward, director of the Syria Transition Assistance and Response Team at the State Department, highlighted the political dimension of the White Helmets’ funding in an interview with [Men’s Journal](#): “[Funding the White Helmets is] one of the most important things we can do to increase the effectiveness and legitimacy of civil authorities in liberated areas of Syria.”

In the Netflix documentary *The White Helmets*, Mayday Rescue is never identified as the administrator of the group, nor does Le Mesurier ever appear on screen. USAID and Chemonics, the for-profit contractor that supplies the group, are also curiously omitted from the film.

An unmonitored money dump?

USAID relies on Chemonics to deliver resources to the White Helmets. The company’s contract with the group is part of the \$339.6 million [committed by USAID](#) for “supporting activities that pursue a peaceful transition to a democratic and stable Syria.” This whopping sum of money supplements the reported \$1 billion the CIA spent in the past year supplying and training the rebel forces attempting to overthrow the Syrian government, fueling a grinding civil war that necessitates the presence of thousands of first responders.

Based in downtown Washington DC, Chemonics has developed a checkered history across the world. In Haiti, the company [squandered](#) millions of U.S. taxpayer dollars and delivered next to nothing for average Haitians while [racking up](#) a \$2.5 million bonus for its CEO. Jake Johnston, a research associate at the Center for Economic and Policy Research, produced a [series of reports](#) exposing Chemonics’ disastrous performance in Haiti.

“After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Chemonics was the recipient of the largest single contract from the U.S. government. But despite the immediate and grave humanitarian needs, funding for Chemonics came from the Office of Transition Initiatives, the ‘political arm’ of USAID,” Johnston told me. “Rather than basing funding decisions on the needs on the ground, OTI provides funding based primarily on U.S. national interests and to help steer political transitions across the globe.”

Johnston pointed to a lack of independent monitoring procedures as one of USAID’s most substantial failures. “Unfortunately, it becomes extremely difficult to track where money spent by OTI and Chemonics actually ends up,” he said. “Programs are designed to be broad, flexible

and fast, distributing millions of dollars to subcontractors with very little public oversight or accountability.”

In reports by the U.S. Government Accountability Office and USAID Inspector General, Chemonics was [slammed](#) for its incompetent performance and poor evaluation procedures, and was accused of wasting tens of millions of dollars in Afghanistan.

For many languishing in rebel-held territory in Syria, however, USAID and its contractors are among the only sources of sustenance. As Brett Eng and Jose Ciro Martinez [wrote](#) in Foreign Policy, USAID’s involvement in Syria “has created another unhealthy form of dependence in opposition-controlled areas like Daraa. Instead of the Assad regime, it is the United States, Jordan, and the for-profit development organization Chemonics that civilians in Daraa are beholden to.”

Eng and Martinez also warned that USAID might be inadvertently propping up some of the more unsavory rebel factions, writing, “without a well-defined, inclusive opposition group, it is unclear to whom civilian loyalties are being redirected.”

Frankie Sturm, a public information officer at the State Department, told me that Chemonics “has put in place third-party monitors to verify that assistance reaches intended beneficiaries and for intended purposes.”

When I asked Chemonics for the names of these monitors, it directed my questions back to USAID, which refused to provide an answer on security grounds. USAID spokesperson Sam Ostrander told me his agency “works with another firm, completely separate from Chemonics” to monitor the assistance to the White Helmets, but didn’t name the company or disclose how much public funding it received.

In 2014, USAID produced the only [evaluation report](#) to date on its Syria-related “transition initiatives.” It was not exactly a portrait of success. “The extent to which OTI’s efforts were successfully building inclusive and accountable governance structures was still unclear,” the report concluded, also noting that “the ongoing conflict resulted in challenges that have led to delays in development and implementation of these activities.”

With such thin monitoring mechanisms in place to track how USAID money is spent in Syria, the risk of misappropriation is considerable.

'Emergency burial'

Far from the gaze of most Western media consumers, [videos](#) and photographs have surfaced on news sites and social media accounts sympathetic to the Syrian government showing White Helmet members boasting about discarding the body parts of Syrian troops in dumpsters, [posting triumphantly](#) on the corpses of Syrian soldiers, joining fighters [accosting](#) an alleged political opponent, [wav-](#)

[ing the flag](#) of Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Al-Nusra alongside jihadist fighters, and carrying weapons.

While it would seem unfair to tar an entire group with the actions of a few scofflaws, more than a few of the images depict events that are disturbingly real. One particularly jarring video (18+) filmed in Northern Aleppo shows two members of the White Helmets participating in an execution, waiting just off camera while a member of Al-Nusra shoots a man dressed in street clothes in the head after reading out a death sentence. The video of the two White Helmets members immediately packing up the man’s body prompted a [statement](#) by the organization condemning the killing and claiming its members were simply fulfilling their task to perform “the emergency burial of the dead.”

In May 2015, a White Helmet member named Muawiya Hassan Agha [provided](#) an extensive eyewitness account to the Violations Documentation Center in Syria on the alleged deployment of chemical weapons by Syrian government warplanes in Idlib. (The report described him as a “media activist.”) A year later, Agha was [exposed](#) by pro-government social media activists for filming a grotesque video depicting extremist Syrian rebels torturing two captured soldiers they later executed. EA Worldview editor-in-chief Scott Lucas [reported](#) that Agha was expelled from the White Helmets days later.

Asked about the allegations of involvement by White Helmet members in human rights violations, the State Department’s Sturm replied, “Syria Civil Defense are emergency response workers who risk their lives to save others—men, women and children trapped by the ravages of war. USAID has no credible information to believe the organization is engaged in anything other than this core mission.”

Chemonics refused to offer a comment on its monitoring and evaluation of the White Helmets or other clients in Syria.

Syria Campaign hones the message

In 2014, the year after USAID disbursed its seed money for the White Helmets, an outfit called the Syria Campaign suddenly materialized to mobilize even greater support for Western intervention through online “click-tivism.” Among the group’s primary functions has been marketing the White Helmets to Western media consumers as non-political heroes saving lives in a sea of sectarian villains.

“We went to meet [the White Helmets] at a training in southern Turkey, they were focused on the training and we were like, we’d like to elevate you guys and get the inspiring work you do out to the world,” James Sadri, campaign director at the Syria Campaign, told me.

Back in November 2014, Tim Dixon, the managing director of Purpose Europe, a former adviser to Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and an original Syria

Campaign board member, issued a [report](#) detailing how his firm's "White Helmets campaign uses compelling storytelling to mobilize public support." Dixon wrote: "Purpose believed their story had the power to inspire empathy and action in the wider public, and launched the White Helmets campaign in August as part of an ongoing effort to build support for the protection of civilians."

Crediting the Syria Campaign's promotion of the White Helmets with "significant breakthroughs on public engagement, media narratives, and funding," Dixon boasted of "elite meetings in New York and DC" as well as coverage in outlets from the BBC to the New York Times. Among the most effective storytelling vehicles, according to Dixon, was the "Miracle Baby" video portraying the dramatic rescue of baby Mahmoud from beneath the rubble of a bombed-out home by a White Helmets team.

The episode featured prominently in the documentary *The White Helmets* and even included a cameo appearance by Mahmoud himself, now a toddler. The Netflix film appears to be at least partly the handiwork of the Syria Campaign.

This July, staffers of the PR company [appeared](#) in

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the studios of Channel 4 in London at a gathering of wealthy donors known as the Funding Network. "The Syria Campaign made a fantastic pitch for funding for their outreach work surrounding *The White Helmets*," the Funding Network reported. The group [noted](#), however, that "for reasons of confidentiality, we are unable to post the Syria Campaign's pitch for the time being."

Laila Kiki, the Syria Campaign's media lead, told me, "We didn't raise any funds specifically for outreach around the Netflix documentary, but our team is supportive of the release."

On September 30, as the attacks on the rebel-held areas of Aleppo reached a level of unprecedented ferocity, the Syria Campaign sent out an email and social media blast in the name of "Heroes of Syria" like the White Helmets. The message urged supporters into the streets for a "[weekend of action](#)" to clamor for a no-fly zone—or what the PR company euphemistically described as, "all aircraft dropping bombs on civilians grounded."

"In solidarity please cover your face in dust and share it with your friends on social," the Syria Campaign advised. "If you can do this with a friend or family member, even better."