

**THE  
SYRIA  
CAMPAIGN**

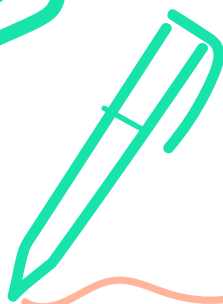


# Campaigning with heroes



## THE GUIDE

Tips, tactics, and many, many stories  
of the successes and failures of  
human rights campaigning



### Acknowledgements

Thank you to Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung for supporting the production of this campaign guide.

Thank you to the heroes who have trusted us with their stories and welcomed us to campaign by their sides over the past five years. Special thanks goes to the Families for Freedom, the White Helmets, Radio Fresh, the doctors of Aleppo, the activists of Ghouta and Daraya, the Free Bassel Campaign and to all Syrian activists and campaigners who continue to struggle for human rights despite heartbreaking odds. Every campaign is an act of hope, and none of the stories we documented here would have been possible without the remarkable resilience and determination of Syrian campaigners.

This guide is dedicated to them.

We produced this guide with hope that it would travel far and wide and be used by campaigners, activists, and individuals everywhere aiming to create change in their communities. We encourage you to lend this guide to your friends, photocopy and share it with your coworkers and make use of it in any way you like. However, we would appreciate you letting us know in advance.

Please tell us how you're using this guide by emailing [guide@thesyriacampaign.org](mailto:guide@thesyriacampaign.org). We'd be happy to hear your feedback and answer any questions!

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# Introduction



Welcome to 'Campaigning with Heroes: The Guide'. This guide is published by The Syria Campaign as a resource for all human rights activists. In this guide you'll find lots of tips, tactics, and case studies that will, we hope, help you think in a new way about your campaigning.

The guide is not a "how-to" that explains exactly how to run campaigns. We don't believe that there is one fixed approach that will always work, and we certainly don't think that we have all the answers. We've organised the guide into short chapters with real-world examples and case studies in each section. This is where we tell the story of a particular campaign by The Syria Campaign, one of our partners, or an organisation that we admire. We believe that the best way to get inspiration is to look around and learn from the experiences of others.

An extended version of this guide is available digitally and includes many more case studies as well as videos of campaigners sharing deep insights into their work and what they've learned about campaigning best practices.

**To get access to this digital guide, email:**  
[guide@thesyriacampaign.org](mailto:guide@thesyriacampaign.org) or go to:  
[guide.thesyriacampaign.org](http://guide.thesyriacampaign.org)

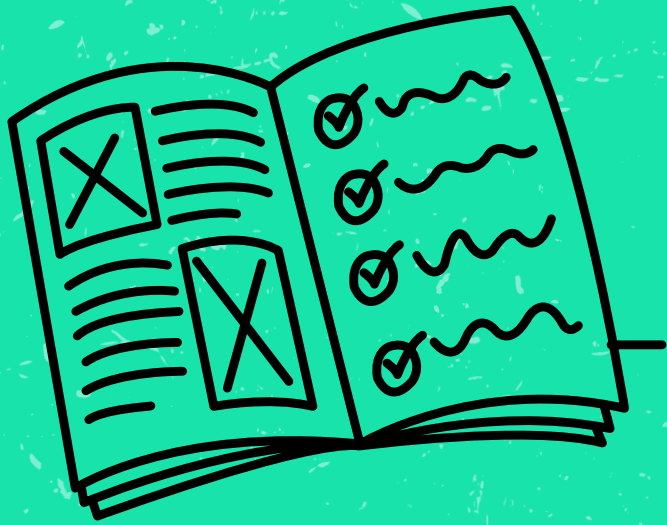
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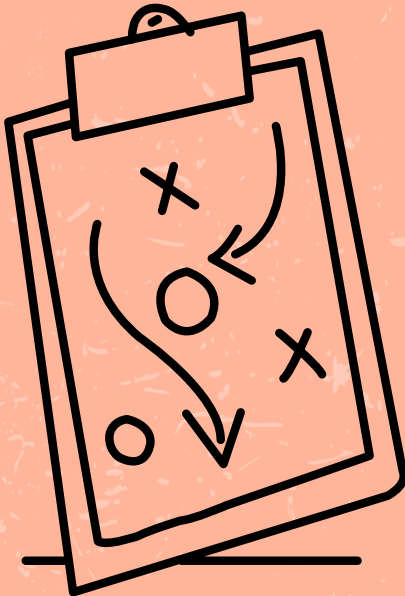
## Building a campaign

When a group of people are working together towards one goal, to challenge the powers that be and create change in the world, they are campaigners running a campaign.

But how do campaigners even start? How do you go from a ‘theory of change’ to building the allies you need to make your vision come true?



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CHAPTER 2

## Campaign tactics

Once you’ve got your theory of change sorted, it’s time for action. Your tactics are the different approaches you’ll use, small and large, to achieve your campaign goals. Be as bold and ambitious as you can. Think out of the ordinary in order to get noticed.


The most successful tactics will probably tap into current events to show how your campaign is relevant to other issues. You will also have a clear way of communicating the key messages for your campaign.

CHAPTER 3

## Making the media

An image can help change public opinion, investigative journalism can bring down a corrupt system, a headline repeated over many days or weeks can give politicians the spur they need to make real change.

But getting the attention of the media is a challenge when the news agenda moves so fast. How do you get the right sort of media coverage for your campaigns and issues?



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CHAPTER 4

## Digital campaigning

Social media is where we’re all having debates, conversations, and expressing ourselves. It’s where the buzz is and where you can gather momentum for your campaign. Nothing gets people talking or sharing more than a creative and timely piece of content – be it an image, video, or tweet. You also need to think of how you will stir the emotions of your audience.

But if everyone is putting out social media content, how can you make yours stand out from the crowd?



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## CHAPTER ONE

BUILDING A CAMPAIGN:  
WHERE TO START

When a group of people are working together towards one goal, to challenge the powers that be and create change in the world, they are campaigners running a campaign. Their campaign will be made up of one or more activities and events all working towards achieving that goal. So, when building a campaign, it's always wise to start by defining your goal. Dream big but be specific.

**Your goal**

When you're starting out or even revising an old campaign, it's always good to step back and ask: "What is our big-picture goal?"

It's important the goal can be expressed simply and understood by everyone in your team. If your campaign gets into unexpected waters or a new but unplanned opportunity arises, your overall goal can help guide you to make decisions about the next steps.

**Theory of change**

Developing your 'theory of change' is a simple, effective way to help you figure out how you can achieve your goal. It requires thinking about the change you want to see in the world, and what you think is needed to make that change happen.

In its most simple format, a theory of change is articulated in one sentence that follows this formula: "In order to achieve X, we must do Y."

**Some examples of a theory of change are:**

- ▶ "In order to stop corruption in the Ministry of Health, we must shame and expose the Minister's bad financial practices."
- ▶ "In order to stop the Lebanese government's ill treatment of Syrian refugees, we must pressure donor countries to use their influence and demand change."
- ▶ "In order to prevent humanitarian funding from drying up, we must break the silence around the desperate conditions in camps for the internally displaced."

- ▶ Some organisations or campaigners prefer to use more complicated theories of change, that include multiple different steps, and for example require you to outline all your assumptions as well. But expressing your campaign approach in this simple format ("In order to achieve X, we must do Y") is a great way to make clear what you need to do to achieve your goal.

You can make it as simple or as complex as you wish, but here are some questions that it is useful to answer to help you get there:

- ▶ What specifically is the change you want to see in the world?
- ▶ Who and what is getting in the way of your dream? Map out the individuals that you need to persuade and list all those you can work with to create change
- ▶ What is likely to persuade people to make this change happen? Is it new evidence, public pressure, a court ruling, an investigative report?
- ▶ What skills, connections, and resources can you employ to make a difference?
- ▶ Are there key dates, decisions, or events coming up that you could influence?
- ▶ How will you measure the successes, triumphs, and losses of the campaign?

Once you have a convincing theory of change, it becomes much easier to think about the story of the campaign you want to tell, as well as what tactics fit into your theory of change and will help you meet your vision.

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## Tell a story, capture imaginations

Of course your campaign will want to encourage people to take actions. But you can't just ask people to take action straight away. You need to make a solid case, provide a compelling argument, and tell a story that will capture the imaginations of your target audience. Crafting this narrative is one of the most important things you will do.

### Here are some tips for getting started:

- ▶ Know your audience and focus on them. Don't try to speak to the whole world
- ▶ Speak to your audience, find out what they care about, what do they read, watch, and do with their time?
- ▶ Write down your key messages, which should include the problem, cause, and solution
- ▶ Make sure you have the evidence to back up the argument you're making
- ▶ As human rights campaigners, make sure you remember to focus on the human. Tell stories about people—their hopes, dreams, challenges, and triumphs.
- ▶ Give your audience a really specific and tangible action to take that directly feeds into the change you want to see. Essentially, make your audience part of your story
- ▶ Remember to tell your audience how it went. People will feel encouraged to act again if they know they made some sort of difference

## Making an argument

You have to think carefully through the arguments you are making in your campaign. In particular if you are working on topics such as human rights, you can be sure that will be people who will challenge you and your arguments. Anthony Weston, in *A Rulebook for Arguments*, provides a useful way to structure your arguments.

- ▶ "The very first step in making an argument is to ask yourself what you are trying to prove. What is your conclusion? Remember that the conclusion is the statement for which you are giving reasons. The statements that give your reasons are your premises."
- ▶ "No matter how well you argue from premises to conclusion, your conclusion will be weak if your premises are weak."
- ▶ "As you begin to formulate a position, take its basic idea and frame it as an argument. Get out a large sheet of scratch paper and literally draft your premises and conclusion in outline."
- ▶ "Once you have spelled out your basic idea as an argument, it will need defense and development."

## A Message of Hope

If you're a human rights campaigner, there is a very good chance that what motivates you is your anger about the injustice you see in the world. It's very tempting to think that the way your campaigns can have an impact is by showing people shocking images of injustice: the victims of war, or poverty, or discrimination. If you can shock your audience with these images, perhaps you can make them take action?

It's certainly true that shocking images can sometimes prompt people to respond. In the case of Syria, the photograph of the body of the three year old boy Alan Kurdi lying dead on a beach in 2015 prompted a wave of media coverage. However – our experience is that shocking images only prompt a short-term reaction of horror. This might be useful at times, and it can bring attention to your issue. However – it can also have the opposite effect: if the situation looks so grim, it can force people to look away. If you really want people to understand an issue and to take action, you need to show that there is hope too, and they can help.

### In our campaigns we have always tried to show:

1. **There is a solution.** No matter how bleak the situation, there will always be things that can be done. These solutions might not be easy ones, and you might have to take time to think about what they are. But all problems have answers, and as campaigners it is part of your job to find them and show people how they can be brought about.
2. **The work of heroes.** Syria is full of heroes. Some work in organisations, some find other ways to help their communities as individuals. Showing the work of groups like the White Helmets and Families For Freedom, or journalists and filmmakers, like Hiba Barakat and Waad Al Kateab, is a way to show the positive steps that people are taking for themselves. This is always a more hopeful message than just showing people who are victims.
3. **A vision of a better future.** It was the hopes for freedom and a better future that brought Syrians onto the streets in 2011. Keeping that vision as part of our campaigns is a vital part of giving people the energy and inspiration to take action.

**In our campaigns we have always tried to show: There is a solution. No matter how bleak the situation, there will always be things that can be done.**

## Call to action

The whole point of a campaign is to create a specific change, and this is often achieved by inspiring a large number of people to do something, which then convinces those with power to create the change. Alternatively, you might reach out directly to those you are trying to persuade. Either way, you need to be very clear about what you are asking people or an individual to do. This is your call to action.

Here are examples, but don't feel restricted to this list! Unexpected asks can capture people's attention.

You can ask people to:

- ▶ Write to their political representative
- ▶ Sign a petition
- ▶ Call an embassy or decision maker
- ▶ Wear a t-shirt
- ▶ Join a protest
- ▶ Share a video or piece of social media content
- ▶ Post an act of solidarity or challenge

## Allies

Work out who you can buddy up or coordinate with to make your change happen. Here are some ideas:

- ▶ Other human rights activists or civil society organisations
- ▶ Artists and musicians
- ▶ Businesses
- ▶ Creative designers and filmmakers
- ▶ Famous people
- ▶ Friendly, sympathetic politicians







## Case study

## Introducing the White Helmets

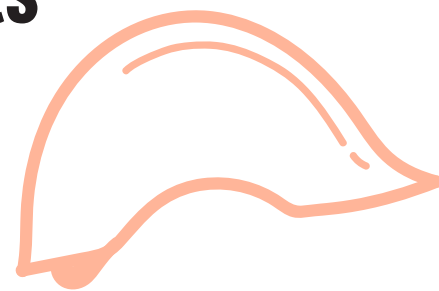
It seems strange to think of now, but there was a time when the White Helmets were barely known outside of Syria. In 2014, we were desperate to mobilise global public opinion against the aerial war being perpetrated by the regime and Russia against Syrian civilians.

The scale of the bombardment and that civilians were the primary target was scarcely understood. The images were so graphic that people were inevitably looking away and could not connect to the experiences of civilians on the ground. Among the media, there was also the prevailing narrative that there were “no good guys” in Syria, and the war was between the regime, terrorists, and Islamists, making intervention impossible.

The White Helmets campaign was primarily focused around storytelling, and the need to explain the truth about what was happening on the ground. We began to notice that in areas that were being barrel-bombed, photos were emerging of young men carrying injured children away from the rubble. These brave volunteers were part of a group known as the Syria Civil Defence (to this

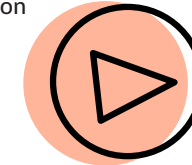
day, they are known both by this name and as the ‘White Helmets’). After connecting and speaking with the Syria Civil Defence, we decided together that by raising the profile of their lifesaving work, we could build awareness of the ongoing airstrikes and the impact of the bombing of Syria.

The first thing we did, which was crucial to our ability to tell the story of the White Helmets effectively, was embed ourselves with dozens of their volunteers for one week while they were undergoing training in Turkey. This helped us get to know the White Helmets as individuals and hear the stories of their rescues firsthand. This time spent together was far more effective than remote interviews, which can take on a more formal tone and make it difficult for people to open up.



### Creativity

The initial campaign revolved around three key pillars, the first of which was creativity. We published three videos, including ‘the Miracle Baby’ video, where we interviewed one of the volunteers present for the rescue of a baby, which went viral. We also made grabby, inspiring social media images with bold white lettering signposting the White Helmets’ dedication and determination—e.g. “No Days Off”.



### Public Support

The second pillar was around public support. We wanted to change the feeling of disempowerment that people were experiencing and give them an effective action they could take to stand with civilians in Syria. We launched a petition on a new website for the White Helmets’ to donor governments to increase support for the group so that they could have all the equipment necessary to save lives from under the rubble. People anywhere could sign this petition as a form of support for the White Helmets.

A clear call-to-action is an essential part of any campaign. Supporters must feel that what they’re being asked to do makes sense, and there’s a clear theory of change around how their actions will make a difference.

### The Media

The third pillar was around the media. The White Helmets are now a household name but this wasn’t the case in their early days. Although we were impatient for the world to know about these heroes and support them, media and public awareness built gradually over time, feature piece by feature piece. We met with journalists and, wherever possible, we tried to make sure they got the opportunity to attend trainings and sit down with these heroes face to face just like we did.

In an article titled, ‘Meet the Bravest People in Syria’, a journalist from the Huffington Post wrote: “By going where nobody else will go, the more than 1,000 members of the group serve as a source of hope in otherwise hopeless situations.” A journalist from FairPlanet added: “These young men head out every day to save lives – fully aware that more bombs may fall on the same site.”

Eventually, the campaign soared, and we saw a staggering amount of public support for the White Helmets, evidenced by donations. Thousands of people from around the world have donated to the White Helmets since 2014.

The reasons why this campaign worked were partnership and investment. All campaign activities and content were designed in partnership with the White Helmets and in response to their needs. We spent years on this work which continues to this day.

**What we learnt:** Stories about heroes are especially moving and allow people to connect with your cause. It’s critical that after you tell a story, you give people an action they can take so that they feel empowered rather than disempowered.





## Case study

# Families for Freedom and the Freedom Bus

The Families for Freedom officially launched in February 2017 at the Syrian peace talks in Geneva. Along with other Syrian civil society organisations, we'd been trying for years to have an impact on the issue of detention and enforced disappearance. We knew that this cause was the number one priority for most Syrians, yet there was very little reporting and global public engagement on the issue.

Our theory of change was that if we could communicate the scale and severity of the forced disappearance crisis—arguably one of the greatest crimes against humanity happening right now—we could get warring sides and governments negotiating the future of Syria to make the release of detainees a priority. We hoped that if we could get the issue of detention on the agenda at peace talks, we might see some progress.

Communicating the scale and horror of the crisis was not easy. The “Caesar photos” that had been leaked from Syrian prisons were too brutal and graphic, and the stories of torture that survivors were telling were horrific. People felt helpless and weren't mobilising on the issue. Families were scared to speak out about their imprisoned loved ones in case their activism and their advocacy increased their loved ones' torture or likelihood of being executed. These obstacles meant it was hard to get international focus on detention and enforced disappearance, which of course suited those responsible.

One day in a workshop organised by the organisations Dawlaty and Women Now for Development, we met Amina Khoulani. Amina gave a rousing speech about her brothers who were detained in Syria that brought everyone in the room to tears. Along with Dawlaty and Women Now, we approached Amina and other family members we knew of who were prepared to break the silence on detention and disappearance despite the risks. We invited them to come to

the peace talks in Geneva in February 2017. There, they would be able to advocate for detention to be treated as a priority and speak to the media and tell their stories. The five women who came to Geneva decided that they would continue to work together under the name the ‘Families for Freedom’. They wrote their founding statement and their demands within the space of an hour.

Through visual demonstrations, media interviews, and public statements, the Families for Freedom were able to rally people around their demands for freedom and justice for Syria's disappeared. Other civil society groups and Syrian civilians quickly supported them, which increased the Families' legitimacy and showed that they had broad support for their demands. They also made connections with other groups representing families of the missing in other countries, such as Bosnia and Lebanon.

The Families were able to get attention on the issue of detention in a way that other groups could not. Although The Syria Campaign had tried to use reports and research about detention and disappearance to move people to pay attention, it was only when the women at the heart of the struggle came together to speak as a movement that people started to listen. Their moral courage was impossible for even the most hard-hearted of politicians or policymakers to deny.

The demands of the Families for Freedom have been covered extensively in the media since their formation, from Al Jazeera to the Guardian and the New York Times. The movement remains one of the most powerful voices advocating for Syria's disappeared, and it is critical to keeping the issue on the political agenda. The Families



also regularly collaborate with some of the other amazing Syrian groups that represent the families of the disappeared, such as the Caesar Families Association and Ta'afi. Families For Freedom now operates with chapters of women in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Germany, and England. It represents more than 2,500 people, and its steering committee is made up of volunteers, including all the founding members. Although it is complex to coordinate a volunteer movement across so many places, and on a topic of the greatest sensitivity and importance, The Syria Campaign is proud that it is still able to support the Families For Freedom, alongside our partners Dawlaty and Women Now for Development.

## The Freedom Bus

The Freedom Bus began its journey in October 2017. With the Syrian peace talks stalled, there were few possible moments to generate public pressure and media attention around detention and disappearance. The idea of the Freedom Bus came during a creative brainstorm around a visual concept for the issue of detention. Buses had symbolic connotations in Syria. They were used early on in the crisis to detain protesters and then to forcibly displace people from their homes. We wanted to reverse that narrative and turn buses into something positive used to rally for the freedom of detainees. The idea also partly came from the Syrian actor Yara Sabri who had been sharing a cheerful drawing of a bus every time a detainee was released from detention.

We decided to buy the Families a bus, which they could travel to countries with and use to get their messages

across. We teamed up with an incredible production company in the UK named “We Make Stuff Happen” and for a surprisingly small amount of money, they bought a bus, painted it red, and mounted the framed photos of the disappeared that we sent them. We Make Stuff Happen maintain the bus and drive it to the locations we need it in. It's not an easy task; because we got it cheaply, it's an old vehicle and has plenty of maintenance issues—but they make it happen!

The bus has traveled wherever there have been advocacy opportunities, from Berlin to meet with the chancellor's office, to Brussels to attend the “Future of Syria” conference.

The Freedom Bus is a strong visual that helps capture the attention of the press and the public everywhere it goes. Most importantly though, it has become a beloved symbol to many Syrian families in exile who have loved ones to detention. They are able to place their framed photos on the bus, entrusting the Families with their stories, knowing that a struggle is being waged on their behalf.

**What we learnt:** Building a movement is difficult and time-consuming. But sometimes this painstaking, grassroots movement—building work is the only way to create change and achieve impact. Ambitious visual actions can be a great tool to engage the public and the media with your cause. Families For Freedom continue to be motivated to do more tours with the bus — creating a strong visual symbol for a group or movement can help mobilise people.







**To prepare for the campaign, we interviewed dozens of people living under siege. This was crucial to understanding life under siege and hearing stories not just of violence and deprivation but hope and innovation too.**

### Case study

## Break the Sieges

We launched the Break the Sieges campaign in January 2016, around the time that news was breaking of people starving to death in a small town called Madaya near Damascus. The campaign was a long-term project, which lasted more than two years and which included a whole host of tactics. It was geared toward meeting one goal: increasing global public pressure to break the brutal starvation sieges in Syria.



**T**o prepare for the campaign, we interviewed dozens of people living under siege. This was crucial to understanding life under siege and hearing stories not just of violence and deprivation but hope and innovation too. People living under siege were doing incredible things to survive and to save their communities. Medics were operating using the most basic tools. People were donating blood constantly because there was no electricity to safely store blood plasma. Alternative sources of energy were being used such as solar panels. We gathered these stories and told them on a website (visit [www.breakthesieges.org](http://www.breakthesieges.org)). We launched the page in January 2016 with a petition calling on the UN to deliver aid to besieged areas.

At first, people were surprised that our campaign was targeting the UN. Weren't they "the good guys"? Our interviews with people under siege proved critical to answering this. They told us that the UN was not adequately standing up to the Syrian regime, which was preventing it from delivering aid to their towns. Syrians also said the UN statistics underreported the true number of people living under siege. Although it's always risky to target people or organisations widely perceived as benevolent, it was imperative that we showcased the voices and demands of people directly affected by the siege.

Community organisations in eastern Ghouta wrote an open letter with their demands to the UN's then-humanitarian relief chief, Stephen O'Brien. He responded to the letter, helping generate some media coverage. As a result, open letters became an important tactic for activists from siege areas across Syria for years. They helped convey what the community was experiencing and rally public opinion around their demands.

Another critical tactic for campaigning around sieges was the release of statistics. In 2015 PAX and The Syria Institute set up a data collection project called Siege Watch. We worked with them to do a loud release to international media when the number of people estimated to be living

under siege hit one million. The story was widely picked up by the media, and even made it to the front page of the UK newspaper the Independent. Being aware of when significant milestones are about to be reached can be helpful to generating attention around a campaign.

Other important tactics in our Break the Sieges campaign were the Taking Sides report, an open letter from women in Daraya, and the campaign for airdrops to Daraya run in collaboration with the late Jo Cox. You should be able to find these with a quick google search — or email [guide@thesyriacampaign.org](mailto:guide@thesyriacampaign.org) to view them in our digital guide.

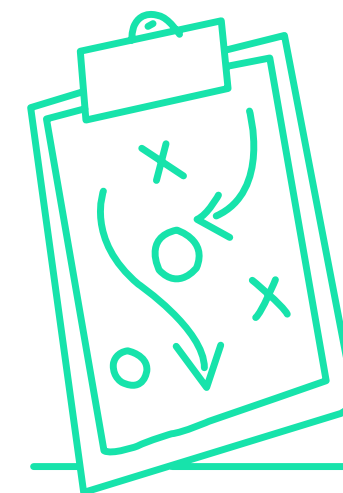
**What we learnt:** It's important to accurately convey the demands of people directly affected by a crisis. To have an impact, sometimes you need to use many, many tactics over a long period of time.





## CHAPTER TWO

## CAMPAIGN TACTICS



Welcome to the fun, creative bit where you get to put your theory of change into action. Be as bold and ambitious as you can. Think out of the ordinary in order to get noticed. The most successful tactics will probably tap into the news of the moment, while also clearly communicating your campaign.

## Menu of Tactics

If you are a small campaign group, working on major human rights issues, it can sometimes seem daunting to achieve your goals, given the strength of the groups you are opposing. But if you pick the right tactics, you can generate power and energy in just the right places to change things. In the famous words of the anthropologist Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

There are a whole range of tactics available to campaigners. To be effective, you need to think what power you can mobilise. Tactics that might be effective in one situation won’t work in another. For example – if you live in a country where political representatives respond to their constituents, then a petition or letter writing campaign to them might be effective. But in other political contexts, that just won’t be an option.

**It’s unlikely that one tactic alone will achieve the change you want to make. Depending on your political environment, a few of these combined tactics could bring about change:**

- ▶ Organise a stunt
- ▶ Organise a protest
- ▶ Nominate someone for an award
- ▶ Pay for a billboard or newspaper advert
- ▶ Ask people to tweet or post something
- ▶ Ask people write to their government representatives
- ▶ Ask people to sign a petition
- ▶ Write a policy report
- ▶ Meet with decision-makers
- ▶ Generate media coverage
- ▶ Work with an artist on a piece of art
- ▶ Launch an event

## Planning your spikes

Whatever tactics you choose – don’t think you need to wait until you have the perfect campaign ready. Don’t be afraid to take risks – getting started with activities and content that you publish is really important for generating energy and momentum, and testing things out will help you refine your campaign.

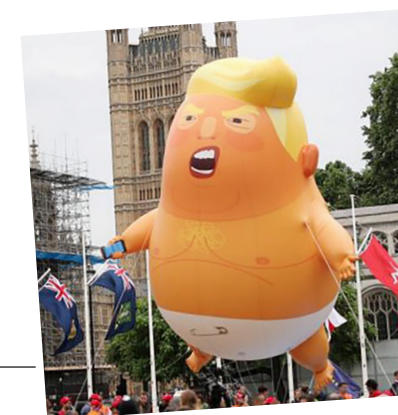
As you build momentum, you may have some long-term, ongoing activities, such as social media content. It can also be helpful to think of specific campaign moments you can focus on. These might be linked to external events (such as elections) or they might be events you plan yourself. In either case – these ‘spike’ moments can be opportunities to focus the energy of your whole team and take big steps towards your campaign goals.

## Photo opportunities

Creating a strong image that will get picked up by the media or shared by lots of people isn’t easy. But a classic campaigning tactic is to create something visually striking and photograph it somewhere relevant to your message.

**Take a look at these famous campaign photos and consider what made them so successful:**

- ▶ World leader heads
- ▶ Red carpet food waste
- ▶ Inflatable Trump
- ▶ Papier mâché pandas
- ▶ Banksy in Gaza
- ▶ Led by Donkeys



**‘Spike’ moments can be opportunities to focus the energy of your whole team and take big steps towards your campaign goals.**



## Case study: Nominating heroes for awards

# The White Helmets and the Nobel Peace Prize



The Nobel Peace Prize is a fiercely competitive accolade that dozens of incredible humanitarians are nominated for every year. We believed, and still believe, that the White Helmets are deserving of the award. Once we heard that they had been nominated we wanted to provide a way for people around the world to show their support for the group's nomination.

Although the prize is not decided by public voting, we wanted to provide a way for diverse groups to show their support for the White Helmets' lifesaving work. The campaign began with us launching a website calling for the White Helmets to win the prize (see [www.nobelpeaceprize.whitehelmets.org](http://www.nobelpeaceprize.whitehelmets.org)). It included a petition for people to sign. The site spotlighted the White Helmets' incredible work through photos, video, and text, and introduced visitors to individual volunteers risking their lives to save others. The website functioned as a way to teach people about the work of the White Helmets and generate support for their peace prize nomination.

We also worked with friends of TSC with celebrity connections to reach out to influential people to endorse the White Helmets for the prize. A-list celebrities like Alicia Keys, George Clooney, and Ben Affleck were just some of the dozens of famous people who publicly endorsed the group. We secured their endorsements by going through people who knew how to reach them, and what the right approach would be to gain their support.



When reaching out to celebrities and influencers, it's important to do so at the right time. If there is very little awareness of your issue of campaign amongst the general public, it's pretty unlikely that any celebrities you approach will have heard of the issue either. It helped tremendously that the White Helmets' work had already been covered in some excellent feature pieces, which we could forward on. We reached out to people who had shown an interest in or who had done charity work around issues related to the campaign. This included the Syrian conflict, the protection of civilians, bombardment, refugees, and human rights. Building engagement with celebrities takes time. In the past, we've begun by asking someone to retweet or share something on social media, then perhaps sign a petition or an open letter. But other asks might include making a donation, starring in a video, or conducting a high-level visit. It is better to start small and then build upon that relationship.

Major Syrian and international organisations also endorsed the White Helmets for the prize, and the campaign had huge support amongst Syrians, which is so vital to our work. Syrians truly owned this campaign, and we should never lose sight of the importance of securing their support in the work that we do. This campaign provided a public way for Syrians to express their pride in the White Helmets and helped push them on to an even bigger international platform.

The campaign gathered such momentum that the nomination of the White Helmets was covered extensively in the press, with some publications making their own video stories or actively endorsing them for the prize.

Although we were desperate for the White Helmets to win, we were prepared in case they didn't. Straight after the announcement, in which the prize was awarded to then-President of Colombia Juan Manuel Santos, we sent out an email asking people to donate to a crowdfunding campaign where we'd raise \$1 million for the White Helmets – the prize money they would have received had they won the Nobel.

This final action reflects the overall tone of the campaign, which was hugely positive, celebrating the achievements of the White Helmets, and the love and unity behind their nomination for the prize.

**What we learnt:** It's exciting and refreshing to ask people to do something positive; calling for the recognition of heroes as opposed to condemning something.



The campaign gathered such momentum that the nomination of the White Helmets was covered extensively in the press, with some publications making their own video stories or actively endorsing them for the prize.





Direct Action

## Throwing mannequin limbs outside the Russian embassy in London

This was a direct action that took weeks of secretive planning. Our goal was to organise an attention-grabbing visual protest to draw attention to the escalation of the siege of Aleppo where dozens of airstrikes were hitting hospitals and crowded civilian areas.

**W**e wanted to scatter hundreds of plastic limbs at one of the entrances of the Russian embassy in London, effectively blocking it. This would send a message to Russia that people worldwide knew it was committing war crimes in Aleppo and were determined that it should stop. We organised the action in partnership with an organisation that had years of experience in visual protests and that wished to remain anonymous.

The event needed to be kept under wraps so that the police and the embassy didn't get wind of it and shut it down. To that end we always discussed it using a code name and didn't apply for a protest permit. It was our way of enforcing some kind of accountability given the international community was looking away from Syria and was preoccupied with the US elections.

Our partner organisation procured the limbs and we worked with them on a precise plan for the day with a minute-by-minute timetable for those taking part. This was crucial to ensuring that the direct action was carried out seamlessly. We only had two or three minutes to arrange hundreds of limbs at the entrance to the embassy and chain ourselves to the gate. Every direct action should have a minute-by-minute timetable.

Roles were agreed ahead of the action. We appointed a direct action coordinator, who was the person in charge. This person made all the ultimate decisions: all members of the team had to follow their directions. This is a critical role when things are moving quickly and publicly to avoid confusion. The direct action coordinator was also responsible for signalling the end of the demonstration, which was important to avoid confusion. All participants walked away in pairs or groups of three in different directions to avoid being identified or subject to repercussions.

There was also a police coordinator whose role was to immediately greet the police when they arrived, show their hands, and explain that this was a peaceful protest. The tone of a police coordinator should be friendly and cooperative while also firm to ensure that the goals of the action are met.

We had told trusted media contacts in advance about the action under total embargo. Giving the press a heads up is critical to ensuring coverage as reporters are more likely to cover your event when it's live than if they find out about it afterwards through a press release or on social media.

We broadcast the whole action on Facebook as a live video, which received 713,000 views, close to 11,000 shares, and 16,000 reactions. Facebook Lives are very effective for direct actions and visual actions as people want to follow along as the event unfolds. Spokespeople should be prepared in advance to speak to the camera.

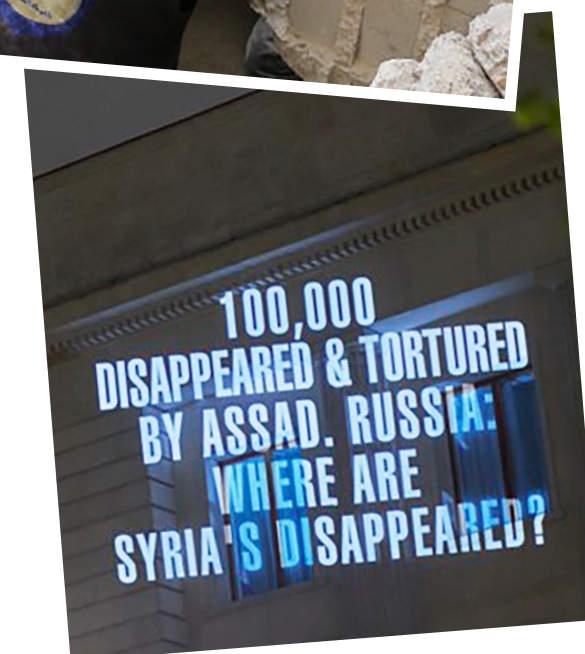
ANA Press made a video of the event, which generated a lot of discussion online, getting more than 4,000 reactions and 457 comments on Facebook. We also immediately uploaded photos and videos of the event for journalists to use and wrote about it on Medium. After the action the Russians falsely claimed that we had locked them in the embassy when we had only blocked one entrance. We decided not to deny this as it made our campaign sound stronger!

Russia also made a formal complaint to the UK about our action, particularly as the then-Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson had also called for demonstrations outside the embassy. On its website, the embassy wrote: "Today (3rd November) a protest action by a group of people interrupted the work of the Embassy as the entrance to the

Consular Section was blocked up with a heap of mannequin body parts, while the protestors handcuffed themselves to the gate... Moreover, nuisance callers blocked the Embassy telephone line rendering it impossible to contact the mission for genuine callers."

The visual nature of the campaign and its boldness ensured us coverage in the Independent, the Evening Standard, Radio Free Europe, the New Arab, and the Telegraph. It was also covered by the pro-Russian outlet, Russia Today.

**What we learnt:** Direct actions require a lot of advanced planning and carry risks, but they can be highly effective in generating noise or coverage for an important campaign.





## Writing reports

# 'Taking sides' and the role of the UN in Syria

Since the Syrian conflict began, civilians have felt betrayed and abandoned by the international community, most notably the UN. In Syria, the UN has been perceived as working too closely with the regime, whether that's by lodging its staff in hotels owned by regime allies, awarding contracts to organisations affiliated with the regime, or waiting for permission to deliver aid to besieged opposition areas.

In 2016, we set out to write a two-page brief about the UN's role in Syria and its loss of impartiality there. But, as we began digging, we realised that this would be a much larger project and one that ended up taking three months to complete.

We conducted interviews with former UN staff members, Syrian organisations, and international NGOs to hear their account of the UN's behaviour in Syria, and we trawled through publicly available information that had been buried in little-read reports. Key to our work was a review OCHA commissioned of its aid programme in Syria.

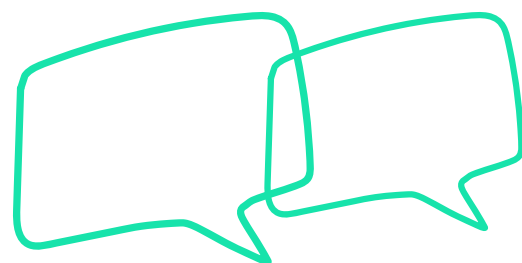
What made our report so impactful were the current and former UN staff who were angry with the way operations in Syria were being handled and who were willing to expose this. We promised them anonymity, but cultivating trust with these individual contacts was also key. We made sure wherever possible to meet with them face to face and listen to any concerns they might have.

Using data from the World Food Programme we made infographics to include in the report and hired an editor and designer to ensure it was as polished as possible. We also asked lots of trusted sources to read early drafts of the report and suggest edits to ensure it was accurate. Sometimes this entailed making big cuts, but they only made the report stronger. We reviewed in detail public UN reports to find data that we could analyse and present in a clearer way.

When the report, titled "Taking Sides: The United Nations' loss of impartiality, independence and neutrality in Syria", was published, its effect was immediate. It was covered by the Guardian on its front page, the BBC, Al Jazeera, and ABC News and was referenced by the Chatham House think tank. On Twitter it was shared by Syria-focused organisations like Crisis Action, Syria UK, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, the Karam Foundation, and the Syria Institute, in addition to journalists like the Guardian's Kareem Shaheen. It remains a legacy piece of work that exposes the UN's failings in Syria.

Read it here: [takingsides.thesyriacampaign.org](http://takingsides.thesyriacampaign.org)

**What we learnt:** A thoroughly researched report can enable you to challenge even the most respected of institutions, such as the UN. Building trust with a range of contacts will help you get the valuable inside information that you need.





In order to get coverage for your campaign, you must therefore do something newsworthy – organise an event, provide information, say something important, tell a story.



## CHAPTER THREE

# MAKING THE MEDIA

An image can help change public opinion, investigative journalism can bring down a corrupt system, and a headline repeated over many days or weeks can give politicians the momentum they need to make real change.



### Media

It's very difficult to prove the impact of media coverage on government policy and practice but it's safe to say that more coverage of a crisis or injustice puts pressure on decision-makers to act. Sustained media coverage keeps that pressure on them and holds them to account for their promises.

**As Bernard Cohen said:** "The mass media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."

### What Is News?

We must never forget that a journalist's job is to report the facts with accuracy, impartiality, and fairness. It is not to cover campaigns or bring about change in the world. C. P. Scott, editor of the Manchester Guardian, which went on to become the Guardian, wrote: "A newspaper's primary office is the gathering of news. At the peril of its soul it must see that the supply is not tainted."

In order to get coverage for your campaign, you must therefore do something newsworthy –organise an event, provide information, say something important, tell a story.

News is determined by editors and journalists but also the audience. Increasingly, traditional media outlets are being led by readership figures, which helps them decide what issues are the most popular.







## The essence of a news story

Most stories follow Galtung and Ruge's list of famous news values, summarised by Owen Spencer—Thomas and summarised further here:

### Impact

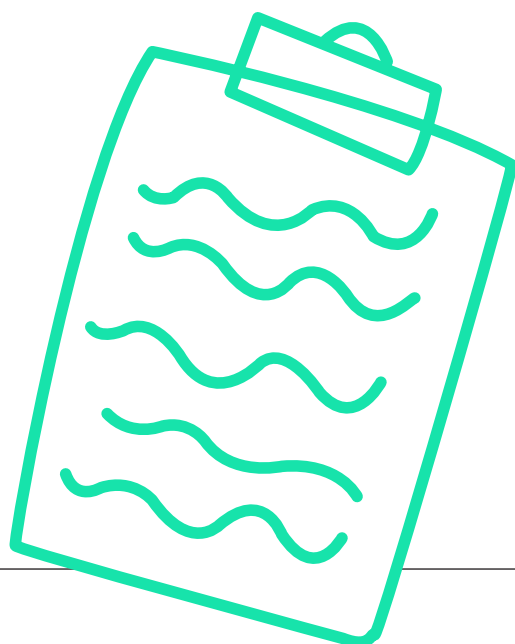
- ▶ The bigger the impact a story has, the more people it affects
- ▶ Events that occur suddenly and fit well with the media's schedule are more likely to be reported than longer term (and slower) changes in society
- ▶ Bad news stories are more likely to be reported than good news ones
- ▶ Out of the ordinary is of greater news value than an everyday occurrence
- ▶ Events that are easy to understand often have greater impact than more complex ones

### Audience identification

- ▶ People are interested in people. Keep them at the heart of your stories
- ▶ The audience must identify with the topic
- ▶ Stories about global powers receive more attention than those dealing with less influential nations
- ▶ The media pay attention to the rich, powerful, famous, and infamous

### Pragmatics of media coverage

- ▶ Stories that match the media's expectations receive more coverage than those that contradict them. The media is more likely to report on an item that they are prepared for
- ▶ A story that is already in the news gathers a kind of momentum—the running story.
- ▶ Stories must compete with one another for space in the media.



## Not all media is equal

The credibility and audience of an outlet matters. Some outlets adhere to a code of conduct and are held to account by an ombudsman, some are state-owned, others are privately-owned.

People want to get their news from reliable sources, but also know that it is increasingly difficult to do so online, with so many publications competing for readers. In 2019, Reuters found that 55% of audiences from 38 sampled countries were concerned about disinformation. In the UK, 70% of audiences worry about the trustworthiness of news. In the US, 41% of audiences verify information by checking multiple sources first.

Different audiences use different outlets and consume news differently. Know who you're trying to reach and what they watch, read, and browse. Think about the best outlets to reach your audience, and ask what that outlet needs to cover your campaign. Then, target them with specific information or stories.

It's not always about the numbers reached. Is there a group of people that are particularly important to reach for your campaign? If so — an article that reaches the most popular newspaper for that audience might be far more valuable than one that has a much bigger, but more general, audience. For example: if you want to influence government policy, what are the key newspapers read by most politicians (and in particular, by politicians from the party in power)?

Disinformation has plagued journalists for centuries and can impact campaigning organisations too. If you find yourself attacked by bots, trolls, or biased reporting, it's not always wise to try and address every false allegation with facts. First, assess what damage it is really doing—more often than not, the lies stay firmly on the fringes and by addressing them, you risk bringing more attention to them. Occasionally false information can seep into the mainstream, then you can consider exposing the disinformation machine for what it is.

**Know who you're trying to reach and what they watch, read, and browse. Think about the best outlets to reach your audience, and ask what that outlet needs to cover your campaign.**

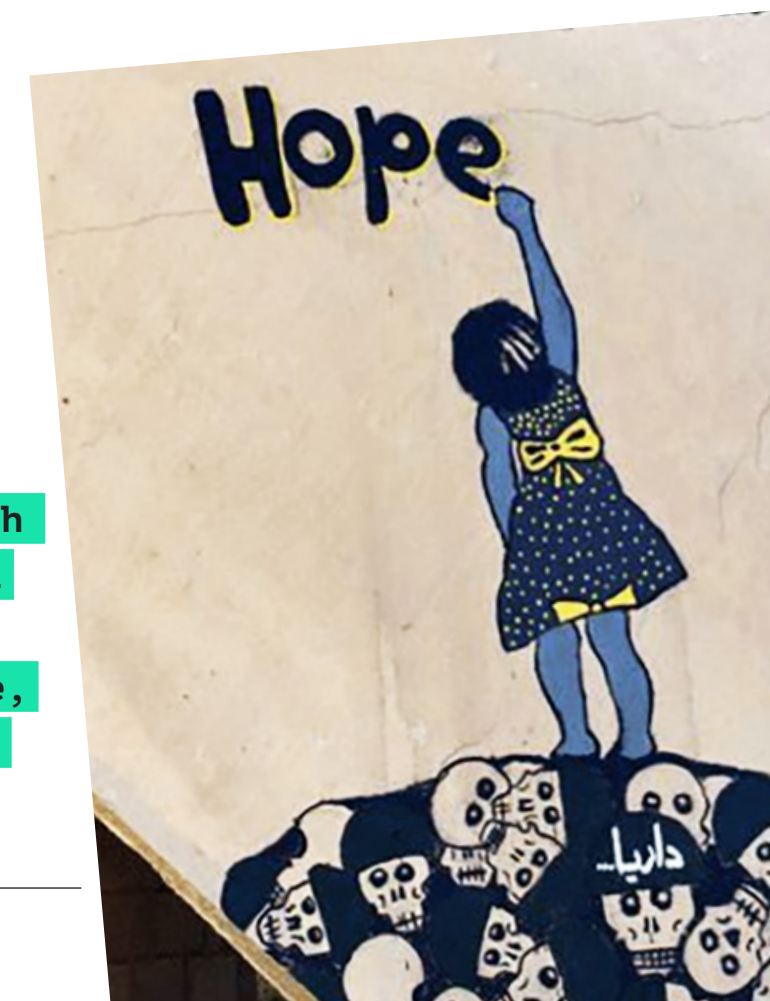
## Campaigns making the media

Before you start writing that press release, think about what your target outlets really need. Here's a list of options to choose from:

- ▶ A brief update on the situation with new information, statistics, and a couple of quotes
- ▶ A photo story for print or broadcast
- ▶ Feature ideas with contacts ready to share
- ▶ An open letter
- ▶ A letter to the editor
- ▶ A background briefing (by phone or face-to-face) from an expert or affected person
- ▶ An exclusive piece of footage or interview
- ▶ An idea for a piece of investigative journalism
- ▶ New information, which may be off-the-record
- ▶ A new statistic
- ▶ A pitch for a comment piece
- ▶ A reactive quote to an announcement or sudden event

## Media top tips

- ▶ Be timely—a news story may only last an hour or a day
- ▶ Make an argument and back it up with evidence, as campaigners we should have opinions
- ▶ It's always people that matter. Don't get bogged down with "issues"—remember what the issue means for human beings
- ▶ Talk to journalists and listen to what they want and need





## Example press release

# Syrian regime increasing attacks on Idlib, killing 39 people this month as civilians fear an all-out offensive



The Syrian Civil Defense, also known as the White Helmets, are trying to help those under attack by pulling people from the rubble, providing medical care and evacuating the injured to the nearest hospital.

## For immediate release

For more information or interview requests please contact:

Name / Email / Phone number

Since 3 February, the Assad regime has dramatically intensified its attacks on Idlib, using a combination of artillery shelling, cluster munitions and airstrikes. Over the past two weeks, at least 39 civilians in Idlib have been killed and 88 injured. On 15 February alone, the regime killed nine people, six of them children, in an attack on Khan Sheikhoun, which the regime targeted with chemical weapons in April 2017. These assaults are a clear violation of the Idlib demilitarised zone, agreed to by Turkey and Russia last year. They also threaten to worsen an already critical humanitarian situation in Idlib by displacing thousands more civilians.

As with previous attacks, the regime is targeting civilian buildings, including schools and homes, particularly in southern Idlib. Activists say they fear Assad might be preparing for an all-out offensive to reclaim northwest Syria, something that the demilitarised zone aimed to prevent.

“Since 15 February, tens of people have been killed and injured, some burned to death due to the high explosive missiles,” says Alaa, a media activist in Khan Sheikhoun. “The shelling has pushed families to leave their homes and seek refuge in nearby villages or camps. The streets are empty today, as the shelling is ongoing; people who stayed in their homes are terrified of what’s coming next.”

“Civilians are the ones to pay the price, we’re being targeted on a daily basis,” says Hanin Sayed, a journalist, activist and photographer from Maarat al Numan. “Civilians, mostly women and children from many towns including Maarat al Numan and Khan Sheikhoun are getting killed everyday. The regime can’t keep claiming to be targeting terrorists because they’re only targeting civilians, schools, bakeries. A woman in Khan Sheikhoun was burned to death on Sunday.”

Assad has made it no secret that he wants to retake Idlib and its surrounding areas, which are home to three million civilians, one million of them children. In recent months, large parts of the region have been overrun by the extremist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which is opposed by the vast majority of the population. Threatened by extremists on the ground and the regime in

the air, millions are in fear for their lives. Compounding the problem is the ongoing US-led offensive against the Islamic State, which is likely to result in the relocation of Syrian members of the group into Idlib, exacerbating the challenges faced by civilians in the region. The arrival of the extremists may also be used as an excuse by the regime and Russia to increase their assault on the area.

International governments’ decisions to cut aid to northwest Syria, sparked by a fear it could be misappropriated by HTS, has left many civilians facing assault without adequate shelter or medical supplies. Those displaced by the latest attacks face a bleak prospect in finding shelter and support elsewhere in the region, with IDP camps already overwhelmed.

The Syrian Civil Defense, also known as the White Helmets, are trying to help those under attack by pulling people from the rubble, providing medical care and evacuating the injured to the nearest hospital.

“We’ve been receiving the injured at our centre especially women and children,” says Oum Omar, a volunteer at Syrian Civil Defence’s women centre in Khan Sheikhoun. “My colleagues and I are working non-stop to rescue civilians and provide first aid for the injured. We are moving the critical cases to hospitals in nearby villages because there are no hospitals here in Khan Sheikhoun. Despite the continuous shelling, we will continue to lend hands to our people and save as many lives as we can.”

“As the world is preoccupied with the imminent defeat of ISIS in eastern Syria, Assad continues to commit war crimes against civilians in the northwest,” says Laila Kiki, Executive Director of the Syria Campaign. “For the 3 million civilians in Idlib, shelling and bloodshed is their daily reality. Turkey, Russia and all other parties must make sure the Idlib demilitarised zone is upheld and that the regime is prevented from launching an offensive on the northwest that would trigger a humanitarian catastrophe of unimaginable scale.”



Working closely with a media outlet

# The 'Killing the Truth' report

The Syria Civil Defence, also known as the White Helmets, has always posed a dual threat to the Assad regime and its backers.

Firstly, the successful rescue work of White Helmets volunteers frustrates the ability of the regime to drive civilians from opposition areas through indiscriminate attacks. Knowing the White Helmets are there to rescue your family if a bomb falls on your home is some degree of comfort to those facing the violent cleansing of their communities.

Secondly, the White Helmets threaten the regime and its allies by bearing witness. The helmet cameras that volunteers wear document the ongoing illegal attacks perpetrated by the Assad regime and its allies and collect evidence of their crimes.

There have always been conspiracies about the Syrian conflict. But when Russia became actively involved in the aerial bombing campaign there was an explosion in disinformation targeting the White Helmets. The volunteers had become the primary witnesses to war crimes, and Russia wanted them silenced. The armies of online trolls spreading lies about the White Helmets began to make some people hesitant about supporting them.

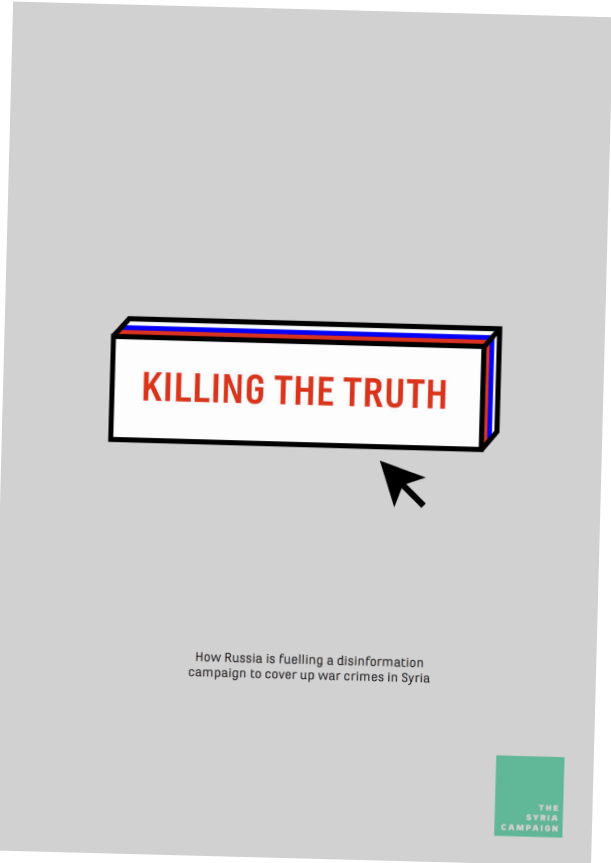
While it was impossible to counter every online disinformation attack, we wanted to provide definitive proof that not only were these smears untrue, but that their spread was part of a concerted effort to kill the truth.

We spent six months working with independent investigative researchers and online disinformation experts Graphika to map out how the lies were spreading online. We also researched how networks of bloggers, academics, celebrities, and fake NGOs were cultivated and amplified by official Russian channels to give them the appearance of authoritative sources of information.

Once the research was complete, we knew that there was one more critical step. We decided to invite a trusted news partner to use our work and build it into an authoritative account with some additional investigation and reporting.

We approached the Guardian, offering them an exclusive. They followed up by conducting their own in-depth interviews and fact-checking processes they published exactly what we were hoping for: an authoritative expose of the Russian-backed disinformation campaign against the White Helmets. Their article and our report continue to be shared and referenced as a way to debunk the lies online.

**What we learnt:** Invest in credible research and partner with a trusted outlet for maximum impact. Some reports continue to have impact years down the line.



Grabbing the media's attention

# The 'Siege Soup' stunt



This campaign was pulled together the day before Syrian peace talks in Geneva on 29 January 2016. We wanted to remind politicians and policymakers that, as they debated how to end the violence in Syria, people were living and dying under siege across the country.

In collaboration with activists from Planet Syria, a network of Syria's leading civil society groups, we staged a tableau outside the talks in which people wearing masks of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, then-US President Barack Obama, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon made siege soup. This refers to the food starving people under siege were forced to eat—essentially water with whatever they could find to add to it, sometimes just grass and leaves. We also made a Facebook event to help promote the action that 82 people clicked “attending” to.

We had permission to stage the stunt but it was still last minute. Despite this, it received a lot of media coverage, including in ABC News, Al Arabiya, Agence France Presse, the Guardian, the LA Times, the Middle East Eye, Newsweek, the New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal. It also made the front page of the Daily Star Lebanon, the Middle East's leading English-language daily. One likely reason for this was that the talks were held behind closed doors and so journalists were desperate for something to report on. Another is that the stunt, especially the use of oversized masks, was very photographable.

The event was also tweeted about by prominent figures including the BBC's Lyse Doucet, the New York Times' Somini Sengupta, and Amnesty's Kristyan Benedict. Photos were also shared by the UK government and the Syrian opposition coalition at the United Nations.

**What we learnt:** Effective campaigns don't always take months of planning, the focus is on making them engaging and ensuring they reach a receptive audience. A strong image can help grab the attention of the press.



Example press release

# On the siege of Daraya

For immediate release

For more information or interview requests please contact:  
Name / Email / Phone number

Urgent call to UN, Russia and US to save Daraya and deliver aid to all besieged towns in Syria 25 February, 2016

As the Humanitarian Access Task Force meets in Geneva there are reports that the town of Daraya, 6 km west of Damascus, will not be included in the ceasefire. The Task Force for Humanitarian Access led by Jan Egeland made a commitment to oversee immediate aid access for those most in need and pressure relevant parties to allow aid deliveries into besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Daraya, with a population 8,500, needs urgent access. It hasn't received a UN aid delivery in three years. Every day between 50 and 60 barrel bombs are launched upon the town of Daraya.

Ibrahim Kholani of Daraya Local Council said: "Living in Daraya is like being trapped in a box. When the barrel bombs start the only place to hide is our basements. The regime has cut us off from the neighbouring town of Moadamiyeh, which was our lifeline.

"We reject the accusations from the Syrian regime that there are extremists fighting here. There is no Al Nusra Front or Isis here, we don't have sectarian militias, Chechens or foreign fighters. All fighters here are from Daraya or the neighbouring villages - they are the people of this area.

"This tightening siege is a tactic employed by regime to empty Damascus of all opposition. Also we are close to Mazzeh Airport which is key for the regime. This is about control.

"The UN promised that Daraya would be included in humanitarian aid deliveries. So far have not received anything either from the ground or from the air. We last spoke to them a few days ago and they told us again Daraya would be included. Now we are devastated to see that we are getting nothing. A bag of rice in Daraya now is 10,000 Liras, or \$40, if it is available.

"Everyone is terrified that we are on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe. In just a few weeks people will be starving because there's no aid coming in, no medical supplies or equipment.

"So far we have managed to survive on our local agriculture, this has been our lung. But the farms have been bombed, and other access is almost impossible.

Bissan Fakhri of The Syria Campaign said: "90% of people under siege in Syria are yet to receive UN aid since the US and Russia pledged to facilitate immediate humanitarian access to besieged and hard-to-reach areas two weeks ago. The aid that was delivered will only last a matter of weeks.

Russia sits on the Task Force for Humanitarian Access and has immense influence over the Syrian regime, currently the biggest besieger. It must get serious about using its influence to allow aid based on need, not military convenience.

"The US and Russia have promised a nationwide ceasefire. To exclude Daraya, where there are no extremist groups, explicitly contradicts the terms of the agreement. If the regime is allowed to choose which areas it wants to continue bombing, this ceasefire will be over before it started."

Elsewhere, medical access continues to be a critical need for all besieged communities. The hospital in the area of Al Marj in Eastern Ghouta was forced to shut when it was hit by a barrel bomb on the 18th of February. The hospital served some 55,000 civilians from 27 towns. While it was open it saw an average of 8,000 patients a month. Patients including the injured and the elderly are forced to walk up to 15km to reach the nearest medical centres in Douma. The area of Al Marj contains a military heliport.



Case study

## Refugee survey

In 2015, we teamed up with Adopt a Revolution to conduct a survey of Syrian refugees living in Germany. At the time, everyone in Europe was talking about the refugee crisis and potential solutions, but no one was consulting with Syrians or listening to them. With Adopt a Revolution and a German academic research centre, we conducted a survey of 1,500 Syrian refugees.

The findings of the survey helped dispel some common myths about the refugee crisis. We found that the vast majority of refugees were fleeing the Syrian regime and not ISIS. Their main concerns were around aerial attacks and forced disappearance. Most wanted to return, but in order for them to be able to do so, airstrikes and detention had to stop.

This evidence-based information helped generate a lot of media coverage both in Germany and the EU more widely. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel publicly referred to the survey twice in one day. Our research was critical to helping shape policies on the refugee crisis that were rooted in the experiences and demands of those most affected by it.

**What we learnt:** Is there a missing piece of information in a big public debate? If there is, you can help shape the discussion by doing some targeted research.





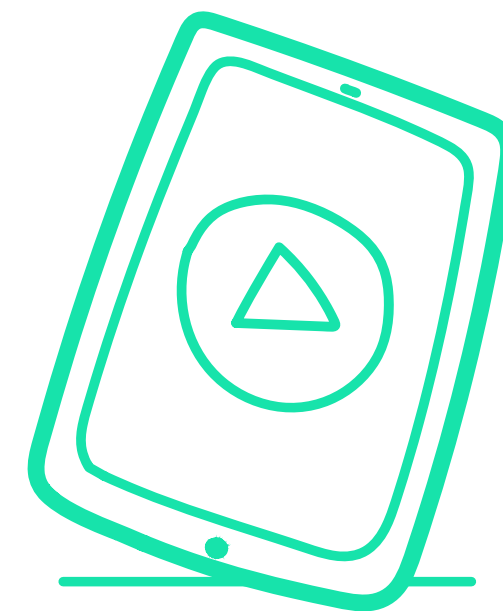
Social media moves so fast that you have to work quickly to be part of the conversation. Find ways to get your message across by creating a new piece of content or finding a new angle that contributes to topics which are already trending.



## CHAPTER FOUR

## DIGITAL CAMPAIGNING

Social media is where we're all debating, having conversations, and expressing ourselves. It's where the buzz is, and where you can gather momentum for your campaign.



Nothing gets people talking or sharing more than a creative and timely piece of content—be it an image, video, or tweet. a creative and timely piece of content – be it an image, video, or tweet. You also need to think of how you will stir the emotions of your audience.

But don't think you can just make an inspiring video and that people will watch it (sorry). Creating a post that will be shared many times over or even go viral is a mixture of luck and hard work, which requires building a following, connecting with the right people and inspiring them to share.

Not all social media platforms are equal. Different audiences use different platforms and different things happen on them. Do not just post the same content across different channels—tailor it for the format and the audience.

For example: if your campaign is about conditions in a refugee camp, and you want to reach journalists and policymakers, offer new evidence and testimonials on Twitter. If you want to raise money for the camps, create personal, story-led content for Facebook and Instagram.

**Building a following**

Those with a large number of followers tend to have some of the following habits in common. They:

- ▶ Tweet and post regularly
- ▶ Are located in a hard-to-access area or privy to little-known information
- ▶ Are respected for their opinions and analysis
- ▶ Add refreshing or unexpected perspectives to a story they're sharing
- ▶ Post newsworthy footage or photos

- ▶ Express their feelings with passion, humour, and intelligence—and do so concisely
- ▶ Are able to catch the attention of celebrities or people with influence who go on to share their posts

**Connecting with your audience**

If you think of a social media platform (Facebook, Instagram) as a party, you want to join in the conversation already happening. Don't stand in the corner trying to interest people in something they are not already talking about.

Social media moves so fast that you have to work quickly to be part of the conversation. Find ways to get your message across by creating a new piece of content or finding a new angle that contributes to topics which are already trending. Facebook Live when you have campaigners or partners at the heart of a news story, can create immediacy and rapidly share information.





## Creative top tips

- ▶ Think about the story you're telling before you start thinking about the content. Common types of story to look for are:
  - First—is this the first time this story has been told, is it new?
  - Last—is the last time the story will be told? Has something ended?
  - Worst?
  - News? Do you have new information?
  - Emotional, personal stories
  - Do you have a particularly strong visual to drive the story?
  - Is it a story on a topic we know people are interested in: sport, animals, travel?
- ▶ Think about your audience. We all have things we want to say but ask yourself, “why is this story interesting and to who?” Then develop the creative aspect from there. If you think a video is interesting to an eight-year-old boy in London, a different creative approach is needed than if you want to appeal to a policymaker in Brussels
- ▶ The platform is important. Create a content format that works for the platform and the audience on it. You might tell the same story through an infographic on Twitter and a first-person opinion piece in a newspaper
- ▶ Keep your videos short. Facebook encourages users to make videos that are longer than three minutes, but many viewers won't watch past the first few seconds. There are exceptions, but if your video is shorter, it's more likely viewers will watch the key parts.
- ▶ The first 10 seconds of your video that autoplay are the most important. You need to quickly engage your audience, so don't fill these with logos or hard to understand information. A high proportion of viewers won't have sound on, so use subtitles.
- ▶ When sharing videos or pictures think about what the share text is and what it adds. For videos keep it short and don't give away the ending
- ▶ While professional designers will use expensive programmes such as Photoshop to create online graphics, there are a range of good, free programmes that work well for non-professionals. We use Canva.com to quickly create images for use on social media. Other free alternatives are also available
- ▶ For infographics and social media images, don't crowd too much information. Think of the proportions and hierarchy of information. Ask yourself first what is the story and design the product to fit. Think very carefully about the image and turn of phrase that will capture your audience's attention
- ▶ Social media is a visual platform. Strong visuals are your best chance at something getting engagement and shares
- ▶ Try and test. Checking the analytics of your social media account will help you understand the type of content your audience is interested in
- ▶ Emotion is the rocket fuel of creative content. Whether you create a video or a written piece, it should elicit emotion whether that is laughter, tears, hope or horror, good creative work moves people emotionally.

**Social media is a visual platform. Strong visuals are your best chance at something getting engagement and shares**



## Writing digital

- ▶ Try this exercise: For a few days, write down all the things you like and share on social media, and then analyse them. What makes them strong? Why were you so moved to share?
- ▶ If you strip everything back, social media is just another way for humans to connect. So focus on that. Human connections in all their emotional glory
- ▶ If you're not part of the story get out of the way. It is far stronger to let someone tell their story than to say: “Our organisation spoke to Khaled this morning” → no! Tell Khaled's story directly
- ▶ Write like you speak—and don't say “we”. Who is “we”?
- ▶ Don't be afraid to express emotion
- ▶ Test. Try different styles and see what works. Digital media gives us data so we can see what works
- ▶ People connect with people on Instagram and Facebook, so communicate like a person. Twitter can take more of an organisational voice.

## Emailing 101

We send emails to our supporters to ask them to take action on a campaign, sound the alarm about a breaking situation, fundraise for ourselves or our partners, inform members of an event in their city, or report back on actions they've taken in the past.

## Creating your mailing list

### The magic three seconds...

- ▶ Your subject line is very, very important—around 80% of people on nonprofits' mailing lists won't

even open their emails. A good subject line can be the difference between 10% or 20% of your email list opening the message. It is therefore worth investing time and testing

- ▶ Your first paragraph should grab people's attention. Present the problem but also the potential solution as soon as possible. This is sometimes referred to as the “crisitunity”. There's a crisis, but there's also an opportunity to make a difference
- ▶ Ideally, by the end of first paragraph people will know why they got the email and sense that there's an action for them to take

### Make it clear what ‘the ask’ is...

- ▶ Your supporters will want to know what they can do to help. What action can you ‘ask’ them to take?
- ▶ Your link through to an action should be high up—don't make the reader scroll down too far
- ▶ Try and include two or three links to the same ask throughout the blast
- ▶ However: there are times your email won't have an action. Your email supporters are part of your organisation and part of your job is to help them understand your issue. Your emails can often be read by more people than a news email and it's more important as they know, trust and like you.

### Be human and authentic

- ▶ People engage with emails from other people not from organisations
- ▶ Have someone in mind when you're writing—you're writing a personal email, not a newsletter
- ▶ Keep both the paragraphs and the entire email short.



Case study: supporter email

# Italy: Stand with Syrians, not with Assad!

Dear Bissan,

Italy’s foreign minister said his government is considering reopening its embassy in Damascus. Unless we stop it, Italy will become the first European country to normalise relations with the Assad regime, despite it being under EU sanctions for its well–documented war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Enzo Moavero Milanesi, Italy’s foreign minister, thinks his comment will fly under the radar because the world’s attention is shifting away from Syria – but if we act now we can change that. Let’s flood the Foreign Ministry with messages and force them to publicly pledge that they will not reopen the embassy and legitimise Assad’s crimes.

Tell Italy: No shaking hands with war criminals:  
[act.thesyriacampaign.org/letter/italy-normalisation](https://act.thesyriacampaign.org/letter/italy-normalisation)

This move is a betrayal of the hundreds of thousands of victims and survivors of Assad’s brutality who are seeking justice. It is in total disregard of current EU policies. It’s a signal to tyrants everywhere that they can break every rule of international law and not face any consequences.

Italy closed its embassy in 2012, citing the unacceptable crackdown on civilians by the Assad regime. While violence may have subsided in parts of the country that Assad was able to take back with relentless bombing and starvation sieges, the regime continues to this day to kill and forcibly disappear thousands of civilians. Restoring diplomatic relations will only serve to enable Assad’s crimes. Over the past two weeks, dozens of civilians in Idlib were killed due to Syrian regime shelling.

If Italy goes ahead, other countries are likely to follow – the UAE and Bahrain have already reopened their embassies in Damascus. Let’s show the decision–makers at the Italian Foreign Ministry that until there’s real peace in Syria – one that is based on justice and political legitimacy – we will not stand by while they shake hands with a mass murderer.

Click to send a message to the Italian Foreign Ministry now:  
[act.thesyriacampaign.org/letter/italy-normalisation](https://act.thesyriacampaign.org/letter/italy-normalisation)

When Italy was blocking a ban on fuel used by regime helicopters to drop barrel bombs in 2014, thousands of us sent messages that shifted Italy’s position.

Let’s do it again.  
In solidarity, Mais



5,190 SUPPORTERS GOAL: 10,000

Last week Italy’s foreign minister said his government is considering reopening its embassy in Damascus.

Unless we stop it, Italy will become the first European country to normalise relations with the Assad regime, despite it being under EU sanctions for its well-documented war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Enzo Moavero Milanesi, Italy’s foreign minister, thinks his comment will fly under the radar because the world’s attention is shifting away from Syria -- but if we act now we can change that. Let’s flood the Foreign Ministry with messages and force them to publicly pledge that they will not re-open the embassy and legitimise Assad’s crimes.

## Italy: Stand with Syrians not with Assad

Click below to send this letter to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. You can edit the message to make it more personal.

I am writing to demand that you publicly reverse your position on reopening the Italian embassy in Damascus. It is shameful that Italy would normalize its relations with the Assad regime when it continues to commit war crimes and crimes against humanity. Real peace in Syria is

Full name\*

E-mail Address\*

Afghanistan

SEND LETTER

The Syria Campaign takes your privacy seriously in accordance with our [privacy policy](#).

The Syria Campaigns’s most far-reaching Facebook post:

# Remembering Dr Maaz

Dear friends,

I am Dr Hatem, the director of the Children’s Hospital in Aleppo. Last night, 27 staff and patients were killed in an airstrike on Al Quds Hospital nearby. My friend Dr Muhammad Waseem Maaz (pictured), the city’s most qualified paediatrician, was killed in the attack. He used to work at our Children’s Hospital during the day and then he’d go to Al Quds Hospital to attend to emergencies overnight.

Dr Maaz and I used to spend six hours a day together. He was friendly, kind and he used to joke a lot with the whole staff. He was the loveliest doctor in our hospital. I’m in Turkey now, and he was supposed to visit his family here after I returned to Aleppo. He hadn’t seen them in four months.

Dr Maaz stayed in Aleppo, the most dangerous city in the world, because of his devotion to his patients. Hospitals are often targeted by government and Russian air forces. Days before Dr Maaz’s life was taken, an airstrike hit only 200 metres away from our hospital. When the bombing intensifies, the medical staff run down to the ground floor of the hospital carrying the babies’ incubators in order to protect them.

Like so many others, Dr Maaz was killed for saving lives. Today we remember Dr Maaz’s humanity and his bravery. Please share his story so others may know what medics in Aleppo and across Syria are facing. The situation today is critical – Aleppo may soon come under siege. We need the world to be watching.

Thank you for keeping us in your thoughts,  
Dr Hatem

This Facebook post, which was published on 28 April 2016, is The Syria Campaign’s best performing post ever, with a reach of around 10 million people. Written as a first–hand account by Dr Hatem, the director of the Children’s Hospital in Aleppo, it recounted an airstrike on the city’s Al Quds hospital that killed 27 medical staff including Dr Maaz, the city’s last remaining paediatrician.

In his message, Dr Hatem remembers Dr Maaz as “the loveliest doctor in our hospital” who would work a day shift at the Children’s Hospital and then go to Al Quds at

night to assist with emergencies there. Dr Hatem goes on to discuss the dangers of doing medical work in Aleppo where hospitals are frequently targeted by Russia and the Syrian regime. Despite knowing the risks, Dr Hatem wrote that: “Dr Maaz stayed in Aleppo, the most dangerous city in the world, because of his devotion to his patients.”

One reason why the post performed so well was that the death of Dr Maaz was already being widely spoken about on social media given his important role in helping the children of Aleppo. We stayed late to write the post and publish it as Dr Maaz’s name was going viral, ensuring that it reached the biggest possible audience. Our post was able to contribute to the collective mourning by being one of the first to share that photo of Dr Maaz and by sharing Dr Hatem’s moving words about his friend and colleague. We also published a longer entry on our website featuring a statement from the Independent Doctors’ Association and an expanded interview with Dr Hatem. The Facebook post was picked up by the Independent and the Metro and was shared by a BBC journalist.

The image used in the post contributed immensely to how far it travelled. The picture had not yet been widely shared, though many people were mourning Dr Maaz online. The photo shows his face clearly, looking over an infant patient with both concern and empathy. It said so much about who Dr Maaz was and what his loss meant for Aleppo.

Facebook has since changed its algorithm, which determines where in people’s timelines posts are displayed. Since the change, posts from friends are prioritised above posts from groups and so it is unlikely that Dr Maaz’s post would have got so much traction if it was posted today.

**What we learnt:** Finding compelling stories of heroes will help you reach a broad audience.





## Case study

# Who is killing civilians in Syria?

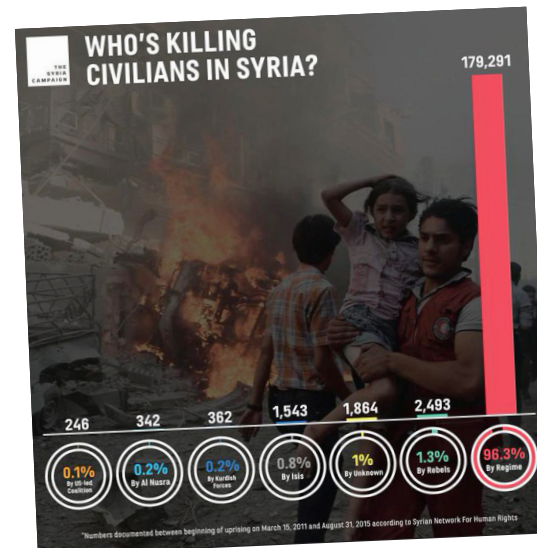
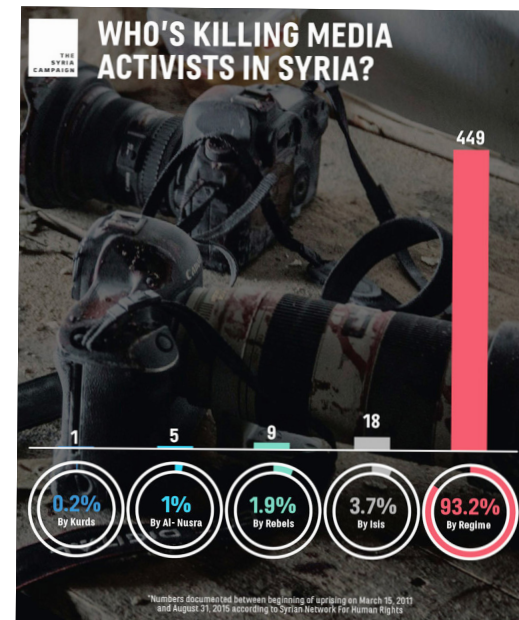
This remains one of The Syria Campaign's most simple but high impact campaigns. At a time when ISIS was considered globally to be the biggest threat to civilians, we teamed up with the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) to create infographics raising awareness about who was really killing Syrian people. As the data showed, in March 2016, the Syrian regime led by Bashar al-Assad was responsible for the vast majority of deaths at around 95.7% of fatalities.

This statistic was not news to many Syrians—but it shocked audiences who were well aware of ISIS's crimes but less familiar with the scale of violence being perpetrated by the Syrian regime. Given the level of coverage ISIS was receiving, our infographics went viral, proof of the importance of timing.

Our infographics spread widely across social media, securing hundreds of retweets on Twitter and getting embedded in a Der Spiegel article. On Facebook, we uploaded all the infographics as one album, which received hundreds of shares. The photos were also used or cited by our partners in their own work. Our partners, along with Syria watchers and friends of The Syria Campaign, were vital in helping this campaign travel and reach a wider audience. We also collated all our updated infographics on one webpage, which shows from 2011 to 2019 who was responsible for the greatest number of civilian deaths, in addition to children, women, media activists, and medics.

Human rights documentation groups like SNHR do incredibly important work and sit on a treasure trove of information. Packaging that information in a creative and visual way can help amplify it and create tremendous impact.

**What we learnt:** New information is always popular, but unexpected information has even more impact.



## Case study

## Changing Italy's mind

This was one of The Syria Campaign's most successful rapid response projects. In 2014, Italy opposed a proposed EU ban on the sale of aviation fuel to Syria. In just 26 hours we managed to persuade Italy's then-Foreign Minister Francesca Mogherini to reverse her country's policy on this critical issue. This campaign worked for three reasons: targeting, timing, and Twitter.

The campaign began with the intel that Italy was planning on supporting the sale of fuel to Syria, which the EU hoped to ban as part of a broader sanctions package. Knowing that this fuel would be used to power regime warplanes, we began calling contacts in Brussels to find out if reports of Italy's resistance were true. Once it was confirmed that they were, we sprung into action and asked our email list of supporters to email and tweet Mogherini to get her to change Italy's position. As Mogherini was about to take a high-profile job with the European Commission we knew that she would be particularly sensitive to any public pressure, which could suggest that she was out of step with the position of other European countries on such a critical issue.

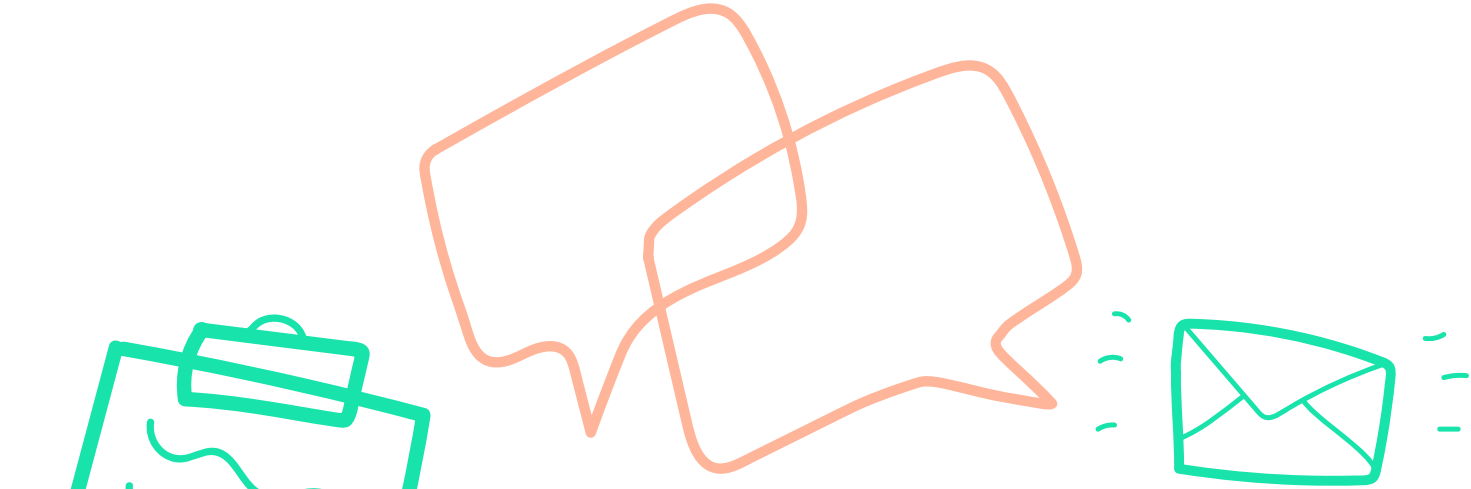
Media, including Bloomberg and European Voice (the EU's biggest weekly, now part of Politico), picked up the story and it began to gain traction on Twitter, including from the

actor and activist, Mia Farrow. Presumably surprised by the public's reactions, Mogherini snapped back at Farrow, saying that Italy was supporting sanctions on Syria. After we replied that the issue was Italy's support for the sale of aviation fuel to Syria, Mogherini said, again on Twitter, that Italy did not support this. Her tweet rang true with what we were hearing from our contacts in Brussels that Italy had finally agreed to support the fuel ban.

A Brussels insider emailed us and said, "your campaign has had a big impact" while a journalist remarked to us, "interesting what a bit of publicity can do". In total 3,655 people emailed Mogherini (in addition to all of those who tweeted her). The campaign proved tremendously popular among our audiences and is a brilliant example of how a quick and targeted response can bring about real, life-saving change. We had confirmation of this on 14 November 2014 when an official from one of the governments involved in the talks told us that our campaign had been "decisive" in shifting Italy's position. The government official told us that they had gone "all the way up the line" but were unable to change Rome's mind. Instead, our campaign did.

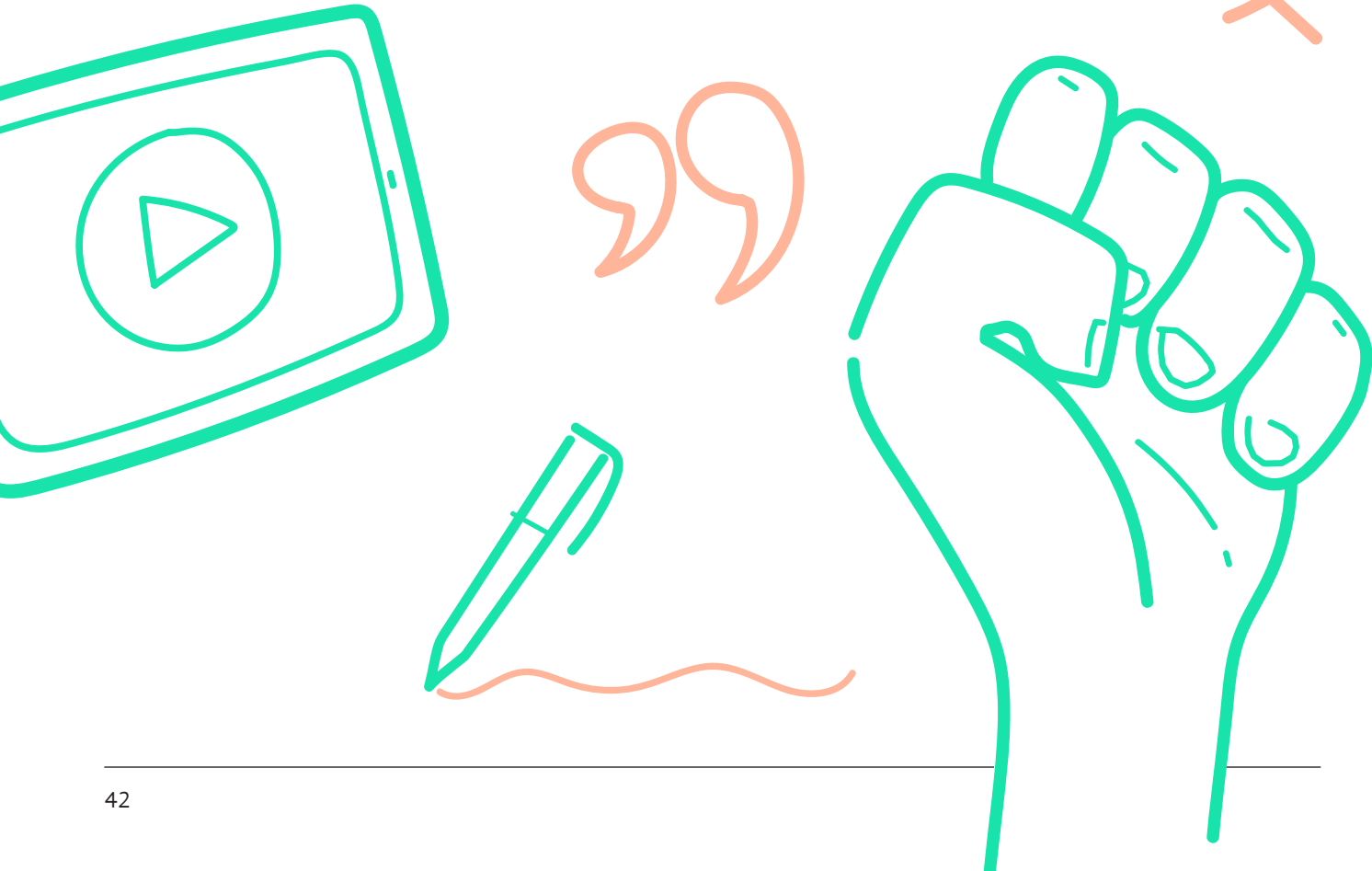
**What we learnt:** Public pressure can sometimes unlock change that insider advocacy cannot.





You've made it to the end of the guide! We hope the tips and best practices we've shared are useful to you for your own campaigning and activism work. Human rights campaigning will always be context specific, but experiences we've shared will spark off ideas for you.

To get access to the digital version of this guide or to ask us any questions, email: **[guide@thesyriacampaign.org](mailto:guide@thesyriacampaign.org)**





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