



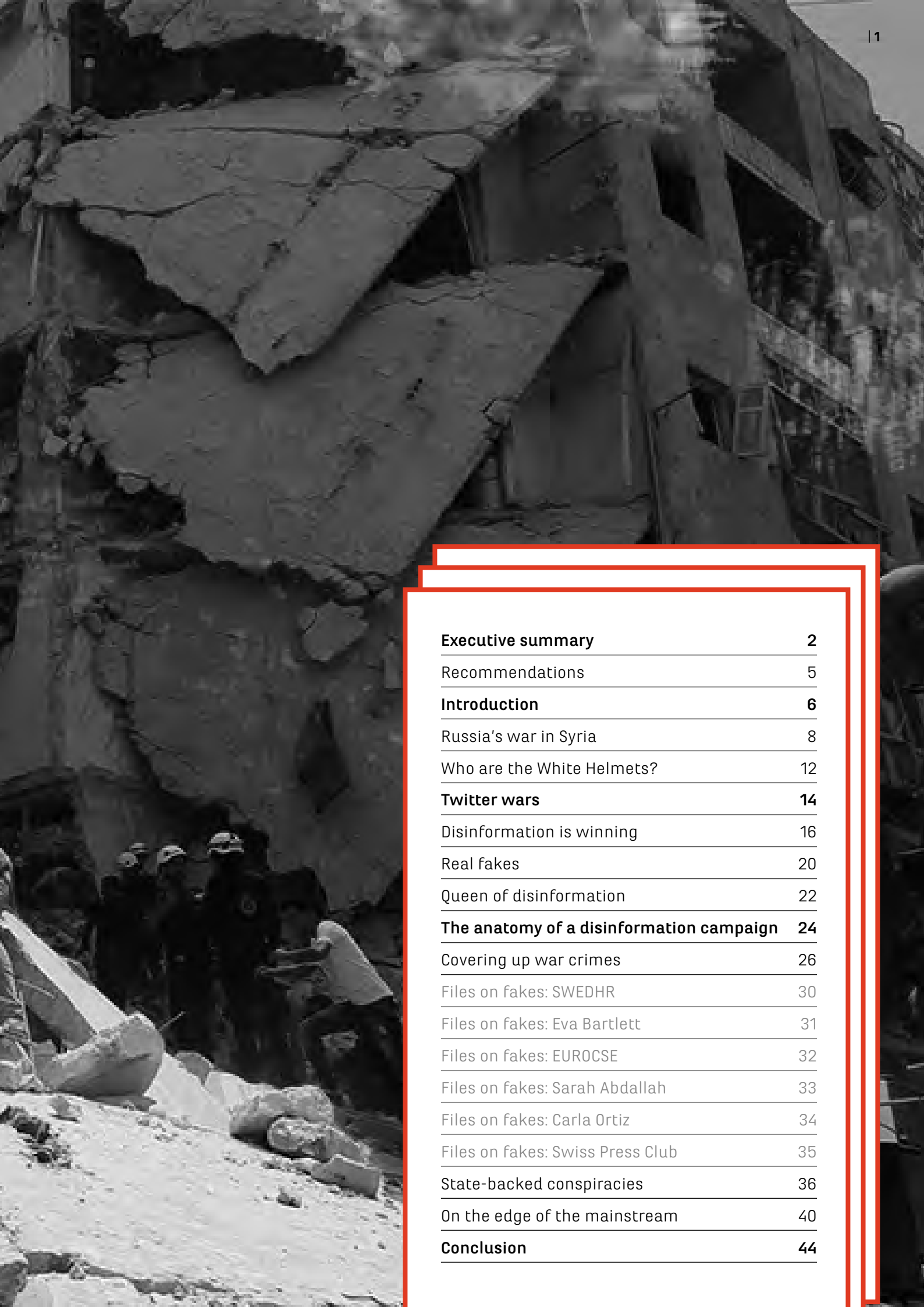
How Russia is fuelling a disinformation campaign to cover up war crimes in Syria

The Syria Campaign builds global support for Syria's heroes in their struggle for a free and peaceful Syria. More than 700,000 members of The Syria Campaign have fundraised for and supported the demands of dozens of frontline civil society groups, including the Syria Civil Defence — also known as the White Helmets.

The Syria Campaign is fiercely independent and its organisational costs are funded entirely by individuals and foundations.

Contact us info@thesyriacampaign.org





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This report sets out fresh evidence of Russia’s campaign to mislead the public and undermine democratic institutions around the world. It reveals how the Russian government is conducting a major multi-pronged propaganda campaign to spread false information about Syria’s humanitarian workers in an effort to cover up its role in some of the most heinous war crimes of our time.

New research shows that bots and trolls linked to Russia have reached an estimated 56 million people with tweets attacking Syria’s search and rescue organisation, the Syria Civil Defence — also known as the White Helmets — during ten key moments of 2016 and 2017.

Many of these smears are linked to efforts to promote false information about the sarin chemical attack of April 2017 in Khan Sheikhoun, which UN investigators concluded were carried out by Russia’s ally, the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad.

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

The White Helmets have saved more than 100,000 lives over the past four years, prompting them to be twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and awarded accolades, such as the Right Livelihood Award and the Arab Hope Makers Award. They have provided crucial evidence to the United Nations (UN) Security Council on three occasions, as well as the US Congress and European, British, French, German, Dutch and Swedish parliaments.

In parts of Syria where most media outlets cannot reach, their videos and photographs of aerial attacks have done more to reveal the reality of the conflict and humanitarian crisis than any other group. Their work has featured in more than 78,000 media reports, including on the front pages of The New York Times, The Guardian, BBC, Le Monde, TIME and many other international outlets besides.

The White Helmets are being killed for daring to operate outside the control of the Syrian regime and showing the world what is happening in Syria. Two hundred and ten volunteers have been killed since 2013 at the time of writing. Their centres and teams of volunteers have been hit by missiles, barrel bombs and artillery bombardment 238 times in just over 18 months between June 2016 and December 2017.¹

As frontline humanitarians, they are protected by International Humanitarian Law. Although they work exclusively in areas outside of government control, they have saved lives from all sides of the conflict, including that of government soldiers.

False accusations, abusive language and violent threats all chip away at the volunteers' morale. However the vicious smearing of the White Helmets, especially false terrorism claims, are designed to undermine the evidence they collect and legitimise their killing.

Blogger Vanessa Beeley, at the heart of this Russian-backed disinformation campaign, has stated repeatedly in public that these humanitarians can be legally killed. "White Helmets are not getting it. We know they are terrorists. Makes them a legit target," she said on Twitter.²

Whilst most of the individuals involved in spreading the conspiracies are usually dismissed as cranks and extremists by the vast majority of policy makers and opinion formers, their reach online has inarguably been extraordinary. Twitter activity during news peaks such as the Aleppo offensive in 2016 and the Khan Sheikoun chemical attack in 2017, shows that far right groups in the United States (the so-called "alt-right") and Russian networks are reaching more people with manufactured stories than any other group.

"Alternative" news sites, rooted in fiction more than fact, have become more influential in these critical online discussions than reputable news sites. This has profound implications for how democratic states can publicly debate and respond to crises such as Syria, a conflict the UN has called "the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time".³

THIS REPORT FINDS:

- Online smears have received the highest state backing from Russia. Official channels RT and news site Sputnik News have repeatedly hosted fringe bloggers at the heart of the disinformation campaign, such as Vanessa Beeley
- Russia submitted a report by Beeley entitled “The White Helmets: fact or fiction” to the UN Security Council as evidence against the group
- Some of Beeley’s followers are part of a cluster of users that tend to retweet the same critical content simultaneously — a solid indication of a coordinated disinformation campaign
- Fifty percent of the accounts analysed appear in at least one other Russian disinformation campaign, while 11 are on a public list of accounts known to be controlled by the most famous of Russian troll farms, the Internet Research Agency.

The international community has done little to stop the bombing of Syrian civilians since the government of Bashar al-Assad started its aerial campaign in earnest five years ago. Now governments around the world and social media companies are allowing Russia a free hand to target rescue workers and cast doubt on the evidence of war crimes they are collecting. This must be challenged and resisted.

Social media users, technology companies, traditional media organisations and governments can all help stop the campaign to smear humanitarian workers in Syria and cover up war crimes. The need could not be more urgent — this disinformation campaign has deadly consequences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Technology companies



Provide users with a way to report accounts that look suspicious.

Consider a peer-verification system where users can vouch for others they have met offline.



When an account is suspended, notify all users who have come into contact with that disinformation. Users have a right to know that they have been misled.

Social media users



Examine the sources and evidence behind the news you consume.



Avoid sharing content which is not from trusted sources.

News organisations



Recognise that the aim of disinformation is not to win an argument but to cloud the truth. Do not give conspiracy theorists a platform in the name of balance.



Be careful who you recognise as journalists. It can be used as a label to legitimise propagandists who do not follow any journalistic code of conduct.

Governments



Hold technology companies to account. Disinformation on Syria, as evidenced on other issues too, is polluting the public debate central to any healthy democracy.



Invest in educating people about this new threat. Publics should be more aware that there are organised efforts to confuse them on key issues.



INTRODUCTION



Photo by [Karam Almasri](#)

RUSSIA'S WAR IN SYRIA

When Russia dropped its first bomb on Syria on 30 September 2015,⁴ it also launched a coordinated and deliberate propaganda campaign to distort and cover up the facts on the ground.

Russian forces have killed 5,233 civilians, including 1,417 children, over two years between September 2015 and September 2017, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)⁵. They have also attacked 143 educational facilities and 119 medical facilities.⁶ But it is the political and diplomatic cover that Russia extends to its ally, the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, that is even more deadly. Russia has now used its veto power at the UN Security Council 11 times⁷ to block international action to curtail Assad's tactics, which SNHR say are responsible for 192,793 civilian deaths, or 90.6% of those killed during the conflict.⁸

The volunteers of the Syria Civil Defence, also known as the White Helmets, live and work in the destruction left behind by Russian and Syrian government bombs. They have saved more than 100,000 lives over the past four years in the aftermath of barrel bombings, aerial raids, sniper fire and chemical attacks.

As first responders, their testimonies and humanitarian data from the frontline have provided crucial evidence to the UN Security Council, international governments and human rights groups.

To date, 210 volunteers have lost their lives in deliberate attacks on White Helmet centres or in the line of duty. They are also subjected to constant attack online – both personally and through a hate-filled disinformation campaign carried out by bloggers, bots and trolls.



Photo by [Khaled Khatib](#)

Manufactured claims accuse the first responders of being terrorists linked to extreme groups, actors staging their rescues for propaganda purposes and intelligence agents for Western governments.

Obscure bloggers with no previous expertise in conflict or Syria have been catapulted onto the global stage by Russian trolls, bots and state-sponsored news, positioning them as credible journalists.

Disinformation is an age-old tactic of warfare. But never before have targeted attacks and fabricated claims been made so violently against humanitarian workers protected under International Humanitarian Law.

The disinformation campaign strategy is to discredit one of the few impartial democratic civil society groups in an effort to cover up the war crimes Syrian and Russian forces are committing on the ground.

The White Helmets operate in nine out of the country's 14 Governorates and have an elected leadership, drawn from their teams across the country. Since they are working in areas where few independent journalists and researchers can reach, the White Helmets are one of the rare primary sources of information about how the war being waged by Russia and its ally the Syrian government is impacting civilians. It is little wonder these governments want the White Helmets smeared or silenced.

This online war is designed to create doubt and confusion about the facts on the ground. Conspiracy theorists, bloggers, "journalists", politicians and fake online accounts are all being used to spread disinformation about the White Helmets.

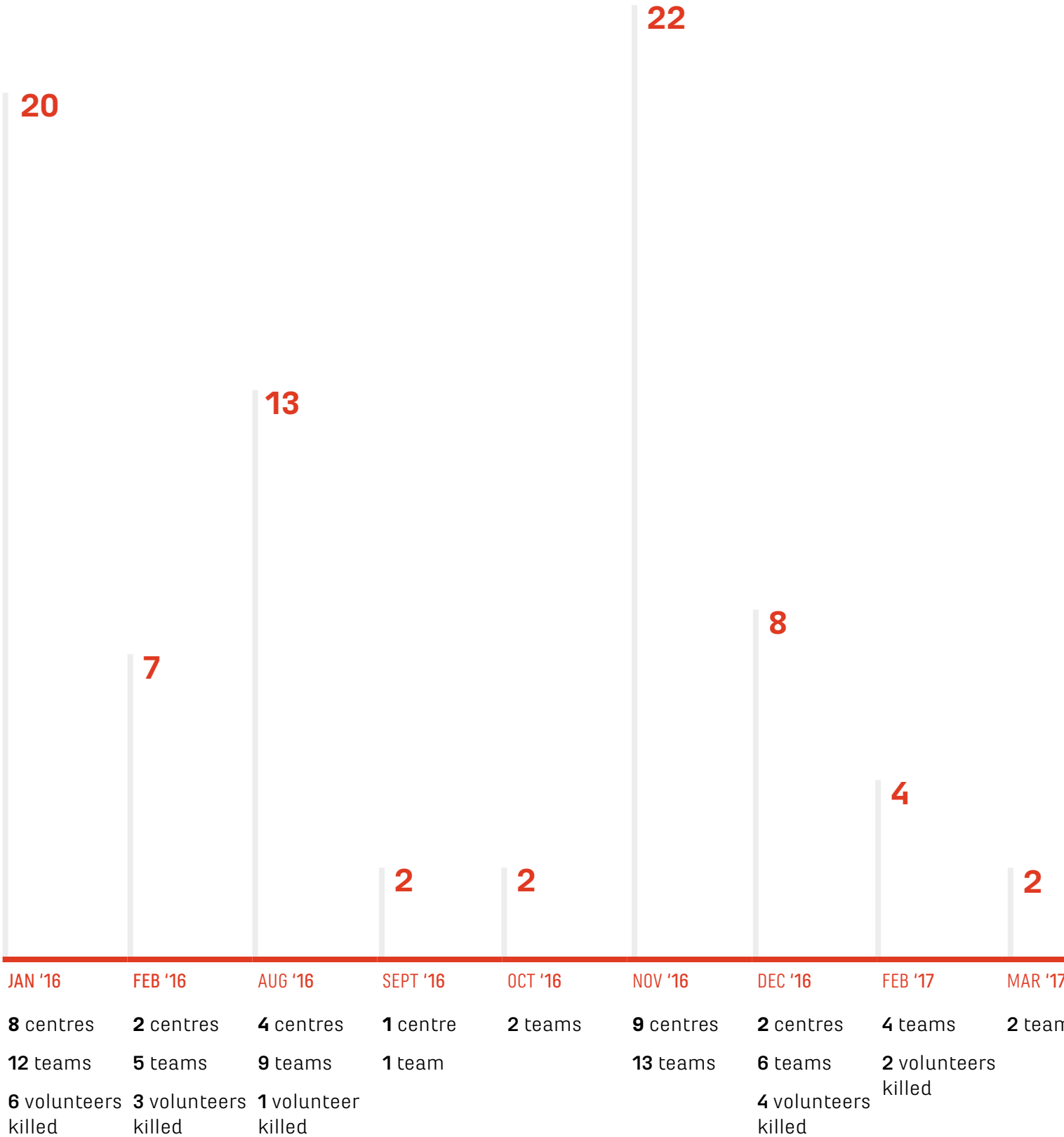
Research for this report by social media intelligence firm Graphika found that Russian and Syrian-backed Twitter accounts are the largest, most connected and most influential in conversations about the White Helmets. These accounts are by far the most critical of the volunteers. While Graphika found that there is some evidence of involvement by Iranian and Hezbollah information assets in the White Helmets discussion on Twitter, this report focuses on what is clearly the most influential group in this online information war: Russian-backed networks and their coordinated smears against the White Helmets.

While concerned governments have started to investigate the impact of Russia's disinformation efforts on democracy around the globe, it is time for a broader investigation to examine the use of these same tactics to bury some of the most heinous war crimes of our time and turn humanitarian workers into "legitimate targets" for attack.

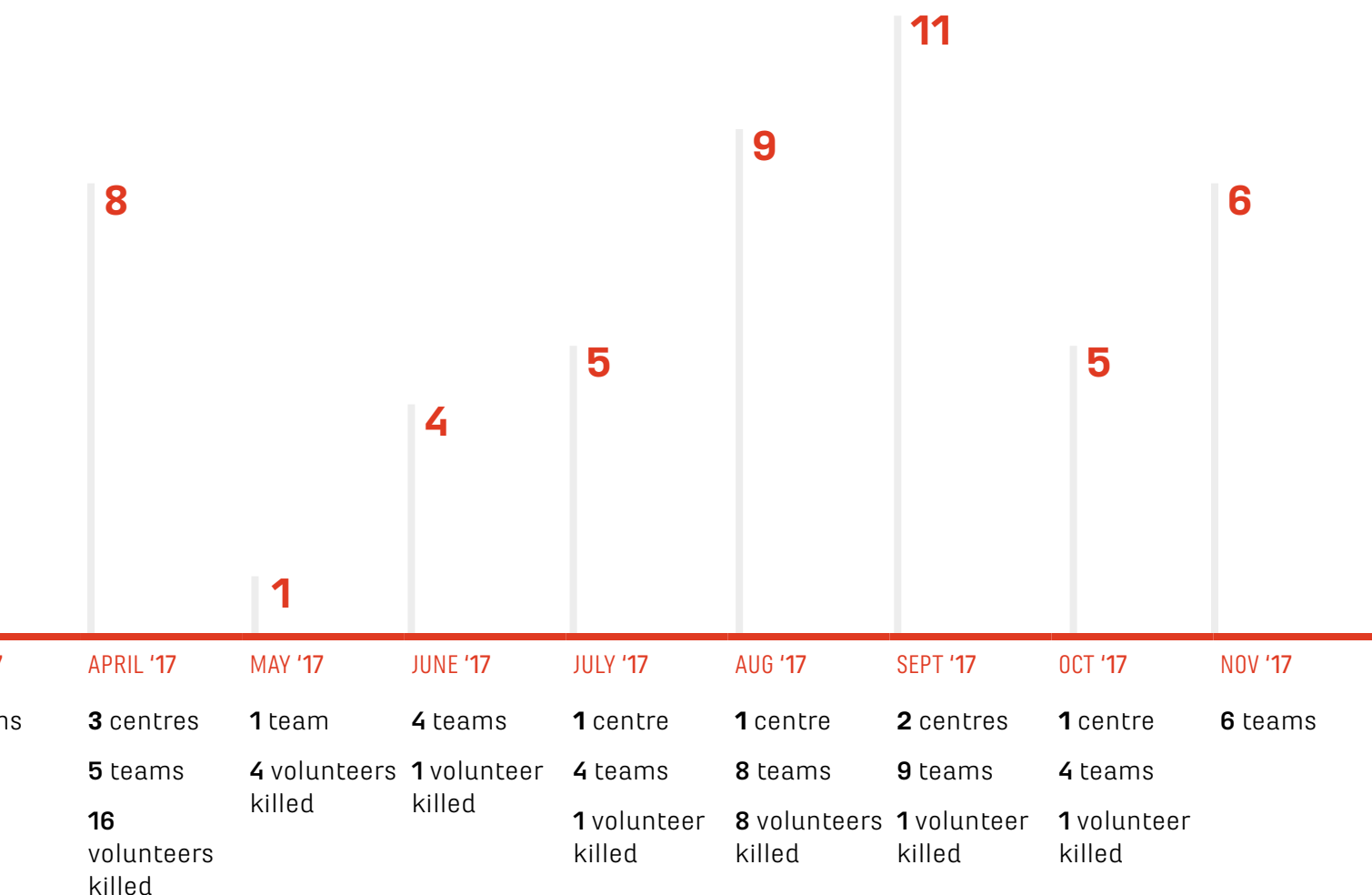
"This online war is designed to create doubt and confusion about the facts on the ground."



2016-2017 TARGET WHITE HELMET TEAMS



REPORTED ATTACKS ON TEAMS AND CENTRES



WHO ARE THE WHITE HELMETS?

The White Helmets are former carpenters, farmers, engineers, men and women, who volunteer to run towards the site of bombings and chemical attacks in an effort to rescue survivors. Today their work goes beyond search and rescue to include mine and road clearance, building reconstruction, community education and electrical infrastructure work.

In a war in which some estimate almost half a million have been killed or forcibly disappeared and half the country displaced, the White Helmets volunteers have all pledged commitment to the principles of "neutrality, impartiality and humanity" as outlined in their strict code of conduct, which

prohibits any member from working with, or actively supporting, any political groups inside Syria. The White Helmets are proud of their role as humanitarian rescue workers and strictly enforce this code.

Their data and eyewitness testimonies, as well as photographic evidence, have been vital sources of information for international investigations into war crimes compiled by the United Nations Commission of Inquiry, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and human rights groups. These crimes include the use of chemical weapons, the collective punishment of civilians through starvation sieges and the targeting of hospitals and medical facilities.

As the leading perpetrator of these crimes, the Syrian government and its ally Russia want to discredit the

White Helmets. As the Guardian wrote in an editorial in October last year about the group, "No one should be surprised that Bashar al-Assad has compared these humanitarian activists to terrorists: that's what he calls anyone who opposes him."⁹

"The White Helmets' humanitarian work and their deep commitment to humanity has the potential to unite Syrians on all sides, and the world behind them." —Excerpt from Nobel Peace Prize nomination letter from the late MP Jo Cox.



Photo by
[Hosam Katan](#)

Top right photo by
[Ameer Al Halbi](#)



However, as this report demonstrates, these unfounded smears are dominating the online debate. Some are even celebrating when these humanitarians are killed: "KARMA IS A BITCH -> #WhiteHelmets killed. That will teach you to kill innocent children to fake #syriachemicalattack!! #SyriaHoax #MFAnews." (@BinsakSB)

It is one example of the violence-cheering hatred on social media around Syria's humanitarians. Those at the heart of these conspiracy theories, such as Vanessa Beeley (see page 22), call for the White Helmets to be killed as legitimate military targets.

Such violent and provocative posts do not prevent the White Helmet volunteers from racing to the next bomb site or chemical attack but they do take a very personal toll on them and affect their morale.

Hamied, 25, a White Helmet volunteer from Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib said: "Our aim is to rescue the largest number of civilians in the shortest time possible. I am frustrated and irritated whenever we are accused of these things. This propaganda got many people to side with these accusations. They got a wrong image of the White Helmets, an image that is the opposite of what we really are. At the same time, this gave the air forces an alleged reason to attack our centres and targeting us while on rescue missions. We have lost so many colleagues because of this."

Ismail, 30, a White Helmet volunteer from Aleppo said: "When I hear these accusations it makes me feel that deep down the people making them don't want us to save people, they want civilians to die without any help. How come of all the people in Syria, it is us who face these accusations? It makes no sense."

Khaled, 22, another volunteer from Aleppo said: "It upsets me that they are trying to hide the truth of what is happening in Syria. But despite it all we will keep focused on our work, saving lives and documenting crimes against civilians and we will never, ever lose hope."

Siraj, 30, a volunteer based in Eastern Ghouta said: "The way that the Syrian regime and its media portray us is affecting us and irritates us. Personally as a member of the Syrian Civil Defence I'm greatly affected by it, it directly affects our spirit. After we accomplish any mission, we see how the Syrian regime media, and even Russian media, try to distort our image and claim that we belong to militant groups, or belong to armed groups. This affects us negatively and puts us down after all what we have done."

"However, despite this negativity we will continue our work till the end. As for the actual effect of this negative portrayal, unfortunately, it's harming Syrian Civil Defence members in all governorates. Members are being targeted through double-tap air raids, targeted attacks are being launched at our centres and vehicles."



TWITTER WARS



DISINFORMATION IS WINNING

The Syria Campaign commissioned US-based social media intelligence firm Graphika to research who is discussing the White Helmets on Twitter and how their tweets are shared. Graphika, which has investigated other disinformation campaigns, analysed more than 12.6 million tweets by close to 2.65 million accounts.

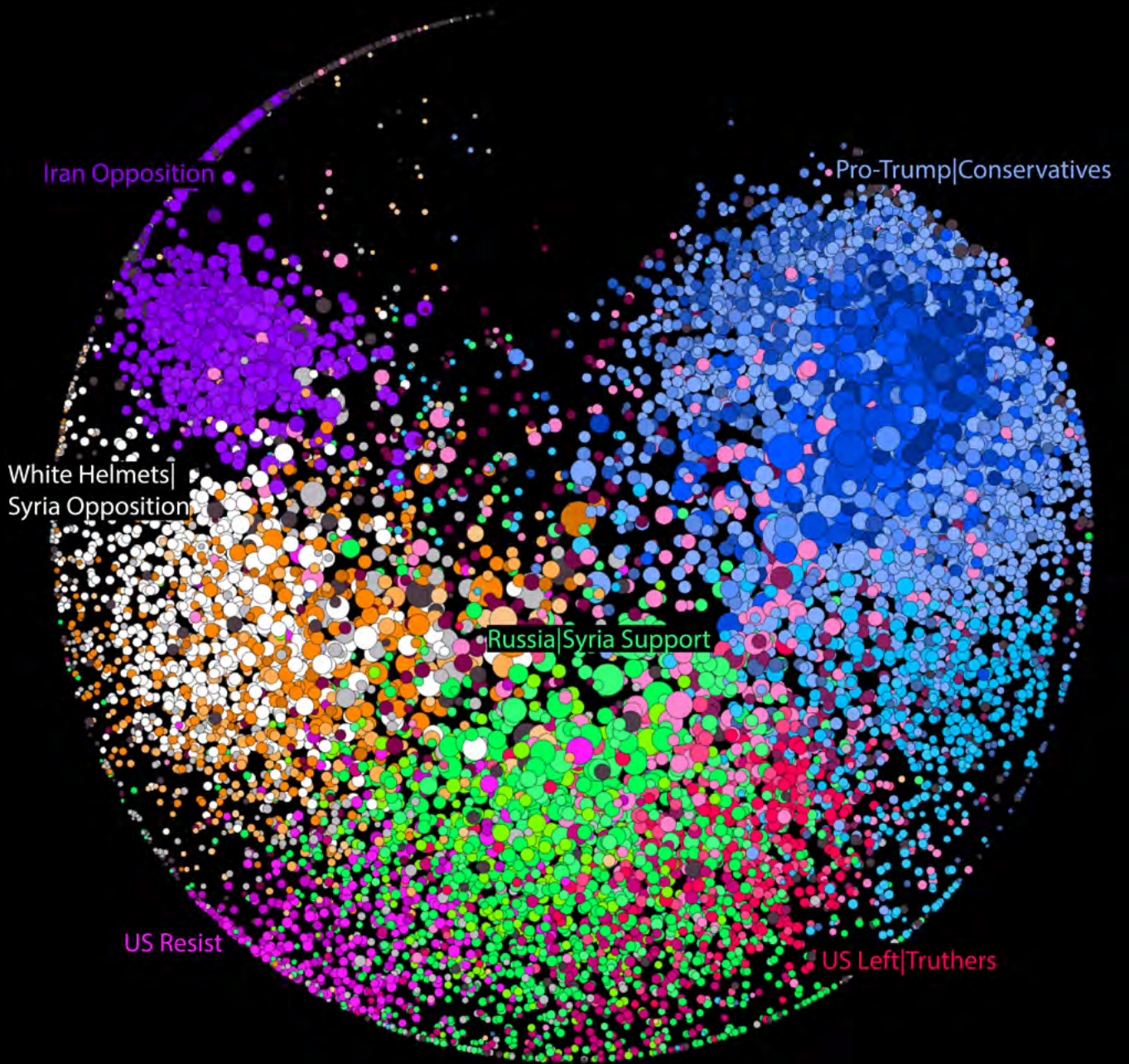
It found that bots and trolls linked to other Russian disinformation campaigns have reached an estimated 56 million people on Twitter with posts related to the White Helmets during ten key news moments of 2016 and 2017.

Graphika looked at ten periods of time between June 2016 and October 2017 when discussion of the White Helmets was thought to be particularly high on the platform. These include the White Helmets nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016, the Aleppo offensive in 2016 and the Oscar win for a documentary about their work.¹⁰

The research shows that some of the most connected and influential accounts in Twitter conversations about the White Helmets are the same individuals targeting the White Helmets with false accusations and violent threats.

“The social media activity criticizing the White Helmets looks similar to other disinformation campaigns we have analysed and bears some of the same indications of coordination, and a number of the specific accounts attacking the White Helmets have played a role in other specifically Russian disinformation campaigns as well.”

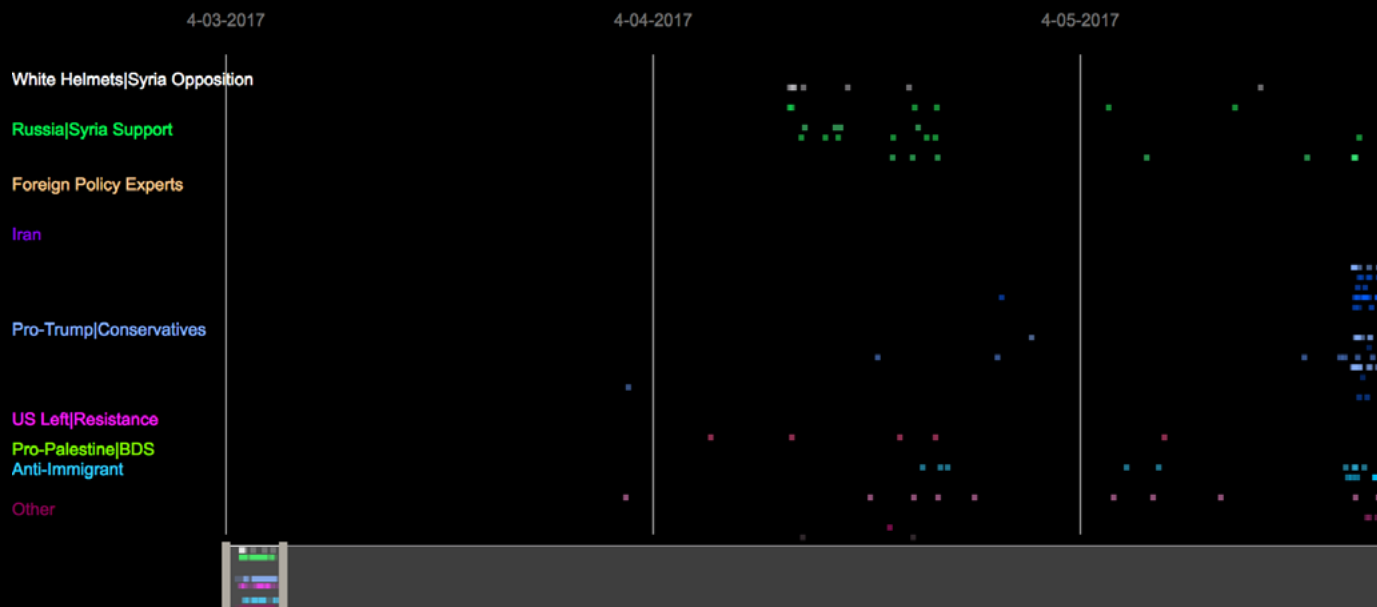
—Graphika, a social media intelligence firm



#SORROS

Graphika filtered the 2.65 million accounts down to 29,000 by looking at those which “participated in the White Helmets hashtag discussion at least 50 times” and then mapped the 12,352 “best connected or most influential” into 47 clusters, which were aggregated into nine groups. The most relevant of these nine are three groups Graphika labelled, Russia|Syria Support, Pro-Trump|Conservatives and White Helmets|Syria Opposition.

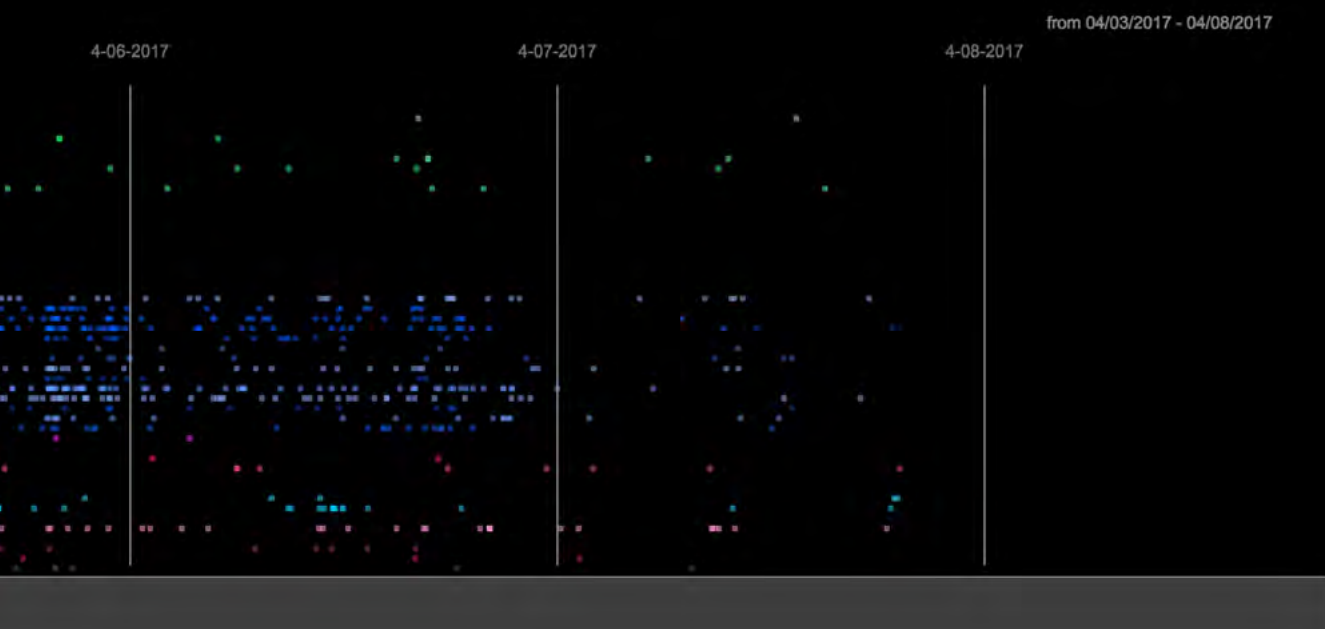
While tweets from accounts in the White Helmets|Syria Opposition group (which includes the official account of the White Helmets themselves) tend to be supportive of the rescue workers, the Russia|Syria Support group’s users “are overtly critical of the White Helmets and closely mimic Russian talking points on the Syria conflict and Russian foreign policy in general”, according to Graphika. This extends beyond Syria policy to include “criticism of the US and Europe, criticism of the “New World Order” and support for Russian intervention in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea”. The third group, Pro-Trump|Conservatives is generally focused on US politics, but when the White Helmets are discussed “they are quite critical and mimic story lines and retweet content shared widely in the Russia|Syria Support group”.



The Graphika research illustrates how quickly conspiracies spread. A 'chronotope' below (a Graphika visualisation of tweets they mapped between 3 and 10 April 2017) for the #Soros hashtag shows "that a large number of users in the blue Pro-Trump|Conservatives group begin, almost simultaneously to use the #Soros hashtag on April 5", following the sarin attack. According to Graphika, "investigation of the actual tweets show that this was driven by a story and tweet from Alex Jones and Infowars".

Graphika's most damning conclusion is the dominance of disinformation. They found that in the ten time periods analysed, "the Pro-Trump|Conservatives and the Russia|Syria Support group, both critical of the White Helmets, are among the top groups in every time period by total tweets". This led Graphika to conclude, "[b]ecause the content created and shared by the Russia|Syria Support group is almost entirely negative (based on qualitative analysis), this means that there is a large amount of negative coverage of the White Helmets in most of the time periods we analyzed."

As this report has shown, this negative coverage threatens to have a significant impact on the work of the White Helmets and their ability to save lives and expose ongoing war crimes. False accusations reverberate beyond Twitter threads threatening to legitimise attacks on the ground in Syria.



REAL FAKES

"It is difficult to prove definitively that a set of accounts are bots or are connected to Russian troll farms, but we can gather circumstantial evidence using a number of different approaches. Qualitatively this network looks very similar to a number of different Russian information campaigns Graphika has analyzed. We analyzed how often users in the White Helmets map participated in these other campaigns. About half of the accounts in the White Helmets map appeared in at least one other disinfo campaign map." —Graphika report

While any search of the #WhiteHelmets hashtag on Twitter reveals an abundance of suspicious looking accounts, it is extremely difficult to prove conclusively if an account is a bot or run by a troll farm. The fake accounts involved in these disinformation efforts are increasingly sophisticated.

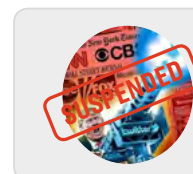
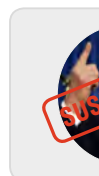
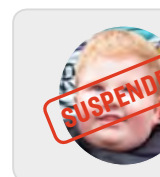
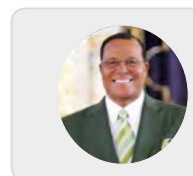
Of the 12,352 accounts mapped by Graphika as being the "best connected and most influential", more than 6,000 – or close to 50% — appear in at least one other Russian disinformation campaign, while 11 are on a public list of accounts known to be controlled by the most famous of Russian troll farms, the Internet Research Agency. Graphika estimates that this 11 is just 1% of the actual number of troll farm accounts involved.

Sometimes there are giveaway signs that reveal, beyond doubt, that individual profiles are not at all what they seem.

On 28 September 2017, independent research by The Syria Campaign found 21 accounts tweeting the same allegation that the sarin gas attack on Khan Sheikhoun was a 'false-flag' operation involving the White Helmets. These seemingly original tweets all shared the same video clip from Russian state 'In The Now' media, with exactly the same accompanying text ("CW used by #AlQaeda not by #Assad #Khansheikun was falseflag of alqaeda linked fake aid organisation #whitehelmets"), at exactly the same moment — 42 seconds past 16:39pm. And yet the profiles of the Twitter accounts suggest they are tweeting independently from London, Berlin, Barcelona, Istanbul, New York, Chicago, Marseille and many other places besides.

Some have biographies that claim they are 'neutral' and 'pro human rights', 'anti-Wahabi', 'anti-Zionist', and a whole array of other positions. The most prominent recurring theme is support for Donald Trump. But they are all fake, pushing out a single message smearing the White Helmets, composed by one individual or computer programme.

Of these 21 accounts, six had been already suspended by the time of writing, but the rest are still visible.¹¹



@JohnL
John L
Brooklyn
Ancient
Corresp
#Turke
#openB



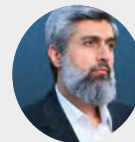
@dking_2017
david king
London, England

ameteur photographer from #holland #maga
#DrainTheTrump #JC4PM #TrumplsSwamp #Killary
#Benghazi #HillaryFoundedIsis #IsraelDid911



@dtudor1970
David Tudor
New York, USA

Middleeast expert economist architech lover
historian #Maga #JC4PM #DrainTheTrump
#TrumplsSwamp #Persistence #Killary #Resistance



@mrtdrm3ss4
Kemaleddin Wolfowitz
Barcelona London Chicago

Secular ex -Jew anti zionist Comments on #Syria
#Iraq #Libya #Lebanon #Turkey #Greece #Israel
Anti-imperialist #Maga



@Jjames_1907
Acan Kemal

Stockholm, Sweden
Science & Technology Culture
& Arts Music #Maga #JC4PM

@DavidRacha1970
David Racha

Chicago, IL Tripoli
#Blacks4tRUMP #Maga @LouisFarrahan
#GreenResistance #Libya #Africa
#MakeAfricaGreatAgain #Blacks4tRUMP



@alexissss1979
Benafactor
Camden Town, London

CW used by #AlQaeda not by #Assad
#Khansheikun was falseflag of alqaeda linked
fake aid organisation #whitehelms



@drybak1970
David Johsont
Berlin, Germany

Architect Anti #Wahhabi #Zionist Proud Christian
#Maga

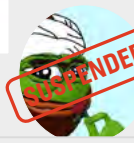


@khaaled1977
Khalled Asad
Palmyra Syria

For the memory of senior #Archelogist
#KhalledAssad #Palmyra #Syria #SavePalmyra
#SyriaHoax #JC4PM #MAGA



@sersoy_34
Izgur Izel Fan Page
Berlin, Istanbul



@zmrmdr
Amiral Kekistan

London Kekistan Istanbul Damascus
Former amir of of Democratic Republic of Kekistan



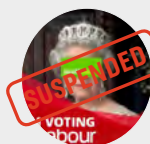
@mrsn_34
Charles Lindbergh
London, England

There were times in an aeroplane when it seemed I
had escaped mortality to look down on earth like a
God. #americanaviator



@david_3435
Son Osmanli Boris
Paris, France ,London,Istanbul

Half #Turk #British ambassador on #Twitter Secular
#Muslim #Jew #Hindu anti #Zionism #Wahhabism
Political Commentor ex #architech trade expert



@rspiceruk
Richard Spicer
Merkeland

Pro human rights and dictatorships #maga #jc4pm
Anti-Bullshit Anti-Hypocrisy. I Never Block. #JC4PM



@erssn34
Mossad Barzani
London, England

Geopolitical analyst: #Iran #Saudi #ISIS # #Kurdistan
#Turkey #Lebanon #Germany | Secular ORTHODOX
UniProf NEUTRAL journalist, #HumanRights



@zmurenis
Zexi Murenus

Ankara Istanbul Izmir
Cultural representative of Turkey on #Twitter Feto PKK
ve Isidle mücadeleden Sorumlu Temsilci Kuzguncuk
belediye meclisi yyesi 17.Donem SHP Milletveli



@mtorto43
Marcus Tortus
Totistan

President of Totistan



@berlin_trump
Trump Yozgat

Berlin, London Istanbul
#Trump fan from #Germany
#TakeBackAmericaAgain
#MakeAmericaGreatAgain



@Sheikpeare_34
KimJongUn Shalom
Marseille, France

#DPRK ambassador on #Twitter - #JC4PM -İlmi
Yayma Cemiyeti Eş Baskani-Strategist -Archeolohy-
Architecture RT* @RT_com



@trrs_lowen
Jamel AboJuzi
Sussex, WI

DSIS Devrimci Seks Iscileri Sendikası Baskani-Türk
Musevileri Cemiyeti Eski Baskani

@lowen4
lowen
n, NY

History & Ancient Greece & BBC Yozgat
endor #Iran #Saudi #ISIS #Syria #Iraq
y #Lebanon #Germany #Secular #Maga
ordersforisrael

QUEEN OF DISINFORMATION

Of the sources of disinformation on the White Helmets, none have been more prolific than Vanessa Beeley, whose smears have been amplified by trolls online and broadcast by Russian state channels RT and Sputnik News.

Vanessa Beeley did not set foot in Syria until July 2016 and since then she has become a social media personality, pushing the idea that, in her words, the White Helmets are “NATO’s pseudo ‘NGO’ construct”¹² and a “terrorist support group and Western propaganda tool”¹³. That someone so far removed from journalism could become so influential to the debate on the White Helmets is testament to the level of amplification given to her disinformation.

From her farmhouse in France, Beeley has called publicly for the White Helmets to be considered legitimate targets in the conflict at least seven times, stripping them of the protection offered by International Law to humanitarians in war.

A previously unknown blogger, her profile is the second most connected Twitter account in the disinformation campaign identified. Graphika found that some of Beeley’s followers are part of a cluster of users that tend to retweet the same critical content simultaneously — a solid indication of a coordinated disinformation campaign.

In 2016 she met with Putin’s point man on Syria, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Bogdanov, as well as with Maria Zakharova, Putin’s Director of Information and Press in Moscow and Bashar Al-Assad in Damascus.¹⁴ On Facebook she described her two-hour meeting with the Syrian President as her “proudest moment.”¹⁵



Maria Zakharova and Vanessa Beeley



As Associate Editor of 21st Century Wire, Beeley oversees a website which has claimed anti-semitism "is a multi-million pound industry" and pushed conspiracy theories about George Soros, chemtrails, MH17, Sandy Hook¹⁶ and the 9/11 terror attack.¹⁷

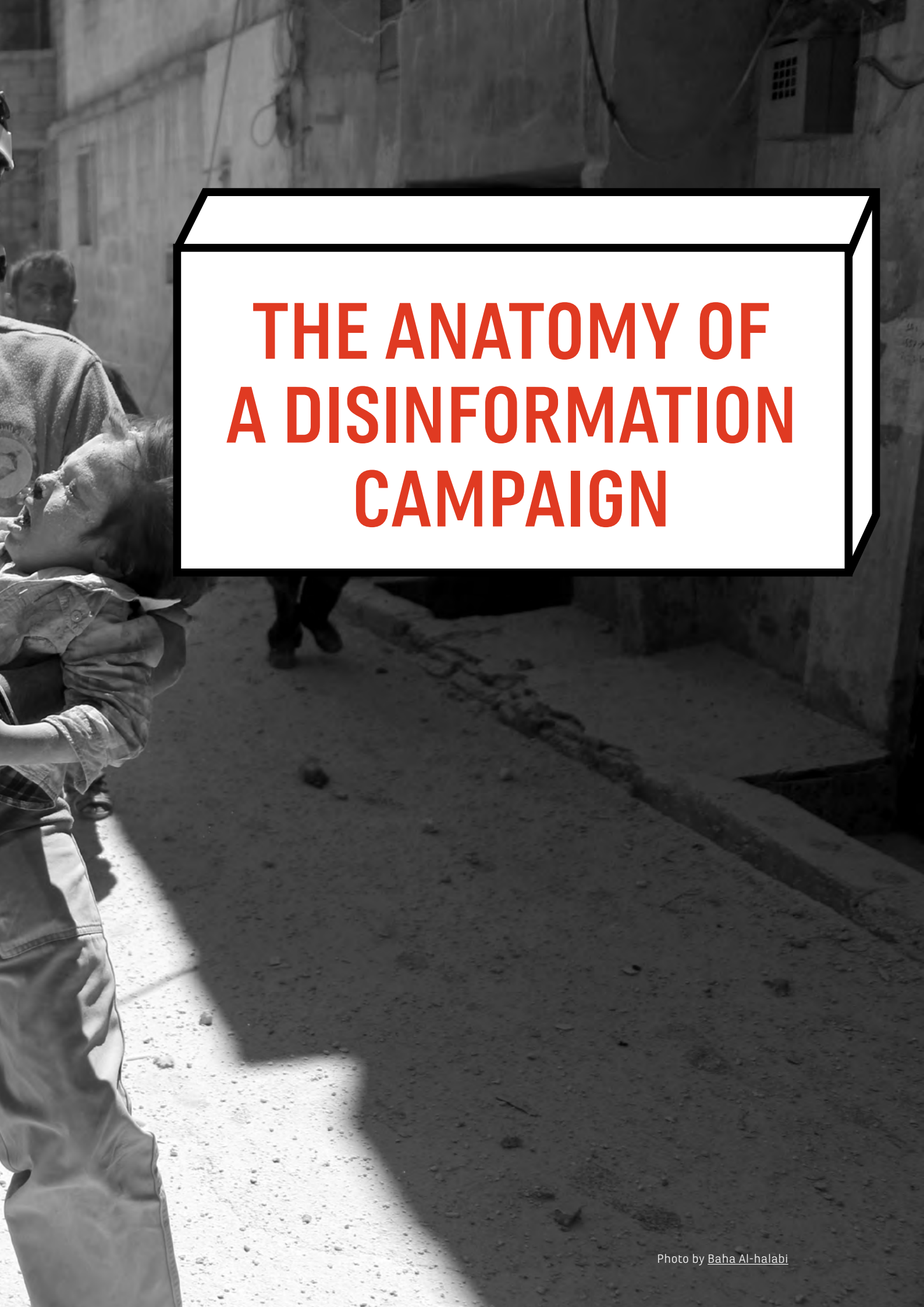
In a private message exchange made public, Beeley admitted that systematic torture happens in Syria, "but it is largely irrelevant to the bigger picture which is protesting illegal intervention and supporting the Syrian Gov[ernment]".¹⁸ Reporters without Borders (RsF) has spoken out against Beeley and her claims calling her "a so-called journalist".



President Bashar al Assad, Vanessa Beeley







THE ANATOMY OF A DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN

COVERING UP WAR CRIMES

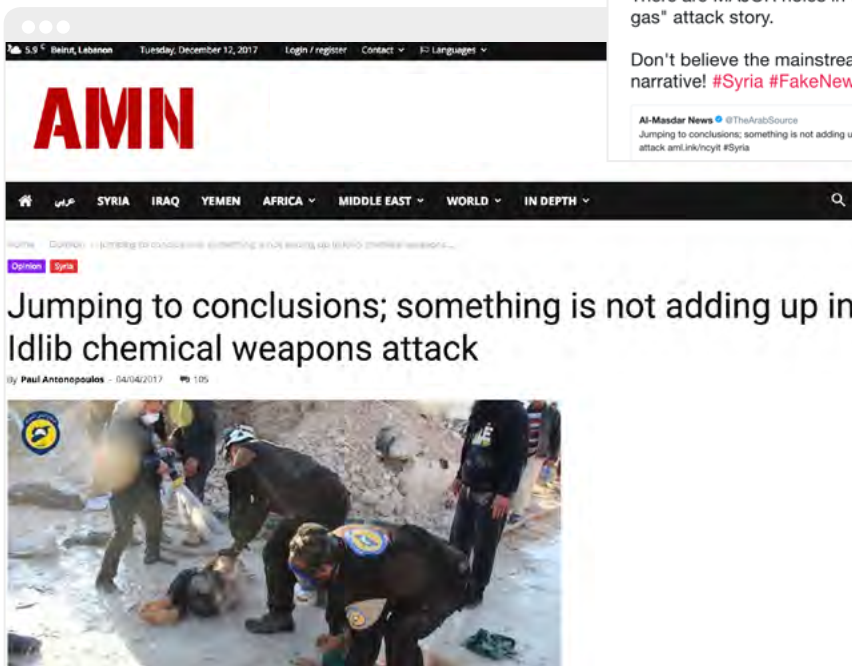
The smears against the White Helmets and the attempts to invalidate the war crimes they expose involve a range of individuals and institutions: academics, politicians, bloggers, celebrities, fake think tanks and medical groups.

Nowhere have they come together more visibly than around the sarin gas chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun on 4 April 2017 that killed 91 people.¹⁹

Unsurprisingly the perpetrators of the attack immediately sought to create confusion online. They succeeded. In just a matter of days, online discussion of one of the most grievous attacks of the Syria war was dominated by a fake news story.

On the day of the attack, pro-Assad website Al-Masdar News claimed the strike was a 'false-flag' operation, faked by the White Helmets and others to invite a response in line with the US missile strike days later.²⁰ The story was picked up by pro-Russia websites, including by American radio host and conspiracy theorist Alex Jones — with more than 700,000 Twitter followers — who reported on the conspiracy website Infowars.com that the White Helmets had staged the attack.²¹ His article, shared more than 25,000 times leads with the paragraph "The White Helmets, an al-Qaeda affiliated group funded by George Soros and the British government, have reportedly staged another chemical weapon attack on civilians in the Syrian city of Khan Shaykhun to lay blame on the Syrian government."

Sarah Abdallah (see page 33) was one of the first to share the conspiracy theory from Al-Masdar News on Twitter. Paul Watson, the editor of InfoWars, is one of her followers.



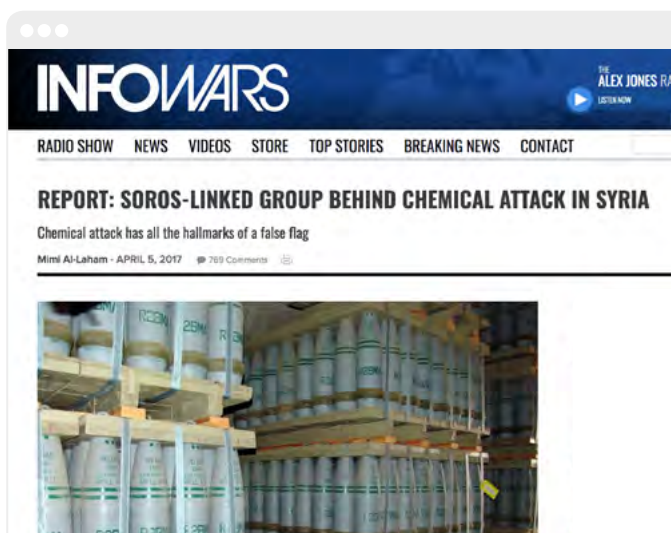
Over a five-day period following the attack, Russian and Syrian-affiliated Twitter accounts dominated the conversation, alongside US conservative accounts. All were exclusively critical of the White Helmets.

Part of this group was Vanessa Beeley (see page 22). On 4 April she tweeted an image of the White Helmet volunteers treating children following the attack with the words: “#WhiteHelmet war porn strikes again. Child exploitation maxed out, immediate investigation into where these children came from,” and “SYRIA: Another Chemical Weapon False Flag on the Eve of Peace Talks in Brussels” linking to an article on the website 21st Century Wire claiming “terrorists” affiliated to the White Helmets staged the chemical attack.

On the same day, 24 hours after the Khan Sheikhoun chemical attack, Beeley presented a series of bogus allegations against the White Helmets to a conference organised by the European Centre for the Study of Extremism (see EUROCSE box on page 32) in Westminster and attended by the former Archbishop of Canterbury and members of the UK House of Lords.

While she did not repeat specific conspiracy theories about the Khan Sheikhoun attack, she claimed the White Helmets were closely affiliated with extremist groups and that they staged fake rescue footage, including from another chemical attack in March 2015.²² She spoke alongside Dr Marcus Papadopoulos,²³ a frequent contributor to Russian state propaganda channels, and Syrian government Ministers, Bishr Riyad Yaziji and Ali Haidar, both targeted by Western sanctions for their role in atrocities, who joined via video link-up.

The following day, #SyriaHoax was the number one trending topic on Twitter in the United States, boosted by an army of accounts that tweeted it hundreds of times in a matter of hours





#SYRIAHOAX

The following day, #SyriaHoax was the number one trending topic on Twitter in the United States, boosted by an army of accounts that tweeted it hundreds of times in a matter of hours. J.M. Berger of The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism at The Hague, who studies propaganda and social media analytical techniques, told ABC news that #SyriaHoax is “a clear example of a Russian influence campaign”.²⁴

Doubts around the chemical attack were repeated by the Virginia State Senator Richard Black, who was treated to a tour of Syria and a meeting with Assad in April 2016.²⁵ During the trip, Black pledged to be “Syria’s voice” in the U.S. political sphere.²⁶ Another voice supporting the conspiracy was provided by Democrat and Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard who visited Syria on a secret “fact-finding mission” in early 2017 – “there are a number of theories of exactly what happened that day,” she told CNN.²⁷

Tulsi’s lines were echoed by the Russian ambassador to the UK in the Telegraph newspaper: “A few versions exist. As the information is accumulated there is more and more grounds to think that the terrorists controlling this area blew up the home-built sarin munition on the ground which resulted in civilian casualties. The “White Helmets” acted too hastily to stir public outrage and posted pre-prepared materials on the internet. However, they made several bad mistakes which point to the staged nature of those materials.”²⁸ The ambassador’s article continued, saying “[l]et me draw your attention to the analysis of the social media content on the Khan Sheikhoun incident provided by the NGO Swedish Doctors for Human Rights”, an organisation unknown in Sweden to either human rights or medical professionals (see page 30).

The conspiracy theory continued to echo online, getting support from Carla Ortiz (see page 34), a former Baywatch and CSI Miami star, who has been prolific in her amplification of the smears against the White Helmets. On the day of the chemical attack she tweeted a link to an article about the White Helmets saying “I don’t know how much \$ [it] takes to tell a lie like this! But God is watching! This is deceiving, low and sad #WH are #alqaeda @VanessaBeeley”.²⁹

One month after the sarin attack, Russia took the smears by Beeley to the highest level. Peter Illichev, Russia’s Deputy Ambassador to the UN, submitted Beeley’s briefing paper and presentation slides from the EUROSCE London conference to the UN Security Council and General Assembly as evidence against the group. The cover letter read: “I have the honour to transmit herewith information on the work of the “White Helmets” in Syria... I should be grateful if you would have this information circulated as a document of the Security Council and of the current session of the General Assembly.”³⁰

The submission prompted Canada, the US, Denmark, the UK, France, Germany, New Zealand, and the Netherlands to write a letter to the UN strongly refuting the allegations.³¹

SWEDHR



“Swedish Doctors For Human Rights” (SWEDHR), which appears to have been formed in 2015, is repeatedly referenced as an anti-White Helmets source by Russian official channels.

On 16 March 2017, the Director of Information and Press Department at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova, briefed the press with SWEDHR “evidence” that White Helmets were not only faking videos but killing children. Zakharova referenced SWEDHR’s analysis of a White Helmets video, in which, she claims, you can see “a child that is brought in [who] is pretty much murdered under the camera lights”.

According to Coda Story, a site dedicated to in-depth journalism, the allegations made by SWEDHR were covered across Russian-backed media including, “RT, Sputnik, Rossiskaya Gazeta, Pravda, Zvezda TV, Ren TV and dozens of other Kremlin-controlled media outlets”. A search of Sputnik News shows more than a dozen stories referencing the claims of SWEDHR, with titles such as, “White Lies: ‘Syria Civil Defense’ Caught Faking Rescues, Doctoring Dead Children”, “White Helmets ‘Made Up Syria Gas Attack Story in Campaign for No-Fly Zone’”, and “White Helmets ‘Used as Propaganda by NATO for Further Intervention Into Syria’”.

A few weeks later on 13 April, the Syrian UN Ambassador Bashar Jaafari, referenced SWEDHR’s report in the UN Security Council, which he says shows “the duplicity of the so-called White Helmets”. But who are the “Swedish Doctors For Human Rights”? According to the Swedish national newspaper Dagens Nyheter, the group is a “scam” and “almost completely unknown”.

The Swedish head of Human Rights Watch, Mans Molender, told the newspaper, “I have been working on human rights since 2003, working at the European Court of Justice, in Geneva and at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And I’ve never heard of them before”.

Elin Karsson, the chairman of Swedish Medical Association’s Ethics and Responsibility Council said, “I do not know about this organization, but they are very serious charges that they come with and, to my knowledge, there is no objective reason for.”

The original report by SWEDHR, which accuses the White Helmets of faking medical treatment and endangering children carries many of the same smears from other internet conspiracies. The article, published on 6 March on “The Indicter”, their online news blog, ends with the acknowledgement: “The author wish to thank independent journalist Vanessa Beeley for invaluable feedback”.



EVA BARTLETT

Canadian blogger Eva Bartlett similarly presents herself as an “independent writer” and a “rights activist” but has been photographed wearing an “I love Bashar” wristband in praise of the Syrian dictator.

Bartlett is a close friend of Beeley’s. Her principal contribution to the Syria debate was in an edited version of a talk she gave in 2016 on a Syrian government panel at the UN, alleging that the White Helmets stage rescues and “recycle” children in their fake footage — a story since proved false by an investigation from Channel 4 News in the UK.

The edited Bartlett video shows her talking with the UN logo behind her, giving the false impression of independence and authority. She was invited by the Syrian government to support their agenda.

Hundreds of versions of the edited video appeared on YouTube within days and were first spread through ‘/The_Donald’ channel on Reddit, home to supporters of Donald Trump on the site. Versions of the video clip were promoted by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, senior adviser to President Trump, A.J. Delgado, alt-right personalities Mike Cernovich and Katie Hopkins, and Russian-state media outlets, as well as at the opposite end of the political spectrum on fringe platforms such as the British communist daily, the Morning Star.

All but a few of the original videos researched for this report have since been removed by YouTube, consistent with Google’s shuttering of accounts linked to Russian disinformation.

However a version promoted by the Russian state video hosting website, In the Now, still remains and has been viewed more than 4 million times on Facebook. It carries the caption, “Canadian journo totally crushes MSM reporter on what’s actually going on in Syria”.

Several months later, the Syrian government announced that Omran Daqneesh, the boy who was photographed sitting alone in the back of an ambulance in Aleppo and featured on countless newspaper front pages around the world, was alive and well. In what the New York Times described as part of “a calculated public relations campaign by the Syrian government”, it was Eva Bartlett who was invited to give one of the first interviews, which was duly broadcast across Russian-backed media channels.





EUROCSE

The European Centre for the Study of Extremism (EUROCSE) was founded by Makram Khoury-Machool, former communications advisor to Assad's Ambassador to London, and Dr. Salah Al-Bandar, a former Liberal Democrat councillor and national security advisor to the government of Bahrain.

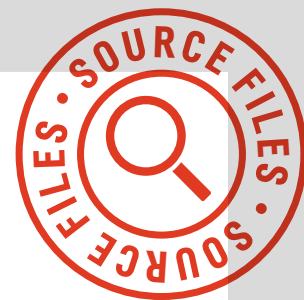
Speakers who appeared alongside Beeley at April's conference include:

- Peter Ford, former British ambassador to Syria who now works as a director of the British Syria Society.
- Lord Hylton, British peer with business connections to members of Bashar Al-Assad's family.
- Baroness Cox, who visited Assad in Damascus in Autumn 2016, is known for her far-right and pro-Russian political views.

In the controversy surrounding the EUROCSE conference, Lord Kinnock, the former Labour leader, said he had "withdrawn all association" from the centre. Cambridge University told the University's newspaper, "EuroCSE is in no way connected to the University of Cambridge". The National Liberal Club apologised for having hosted the gathering because of its clear ties to the Assad regime and donated the funds they raised from the conference to Syrian refugee charities.



SARAH ABDALLAH



The Twitter account with the greatest reach and influence among White Helmets' detractors, according to Graphika, is Sarah Abdallah or @sahouraxo. Despite a highly credible following of politicians, Syria experts and journalists, she is an online personality we know very little about.

Research for this report could not find any evidence of her writing published in any newspaper — national or international— but she claims to be an “Independent Lebanese geopolitical commentator” and her tweets regularly get hundreds of retweets. Many are shared thousands of times.

At the time of writing her account has 108,000 followers on Twitter, including more than 600 verified (blue tick) followers⁴⁸ such as:

- Over 250 journalists (from the BBC, CNN, Washington Post, BuzzFeed, Times of India, LA Times, USA Today, Reuters, Bloomberg, Al Jazeera, Fox News, Yahoo News, NBC, Telegraph, Toronto Sun, The Australian, AFP, CNBC, CBC, Der Spiegel, Globe & Mail, Daily Beast)
- Former members of the Trump administration, including Sebastian Gorka, General Mike Flynn and Anthony Scaramucci
- Over 60 politicians from around the world, including the US, UK, France, Canada, Venezuela, India and Australia
- Key figures from the “Alt-Right” in the US, including Paul Watson, Richard Spencer and Mike Cernovic.

Before the Syrian uprising, Abdallah was tweeting and blogging under the username @jnoubiyeh. An archived version of her Jnoubiyeh.com blog carries a stark black and white header with a picture of South Lebanon and the stencilled words “Our resistance is forever eternal”.

Now she posts a large amount of pro-Russian content, including glowing reports of Putin. More than 1,500 of her followers were found to be linked to at least one other Russian disinformation campaign. And Abdallah’s commentary on mainstream media, the Syria conflict and the malaise of Western democracies is consistent with the coverage of Russian state-backed outlets.

Such open praise for Putin suggests she is likely not a Russian-managed account. As one former employee of the notorious Russian troll farm the Internet Research Agency said, “[we were] prohibited from promoting anything about Russia or Putin”.

However the same may not be true of her followers. Graphika’s social media expert said: “Sarah’s followers look more like the standard lineup of ‘sock puppet’ assets in a Russian disinformation campaign than a network of people following a true Middle East expert of any political stripe.”

Deeper investigation into her identity and motivations is clearly needed but it is remarkable that this individual with no professional background has emerged as such a influential commentator in this debate.



Sarah Abdallah
@sahouraxo

Follow

A question the whole world should be asking:
How did the **#WhiteHelmets** emerge
unharmd in the Syria chemical attack?



Sarah Abdallah
@sahouraxo

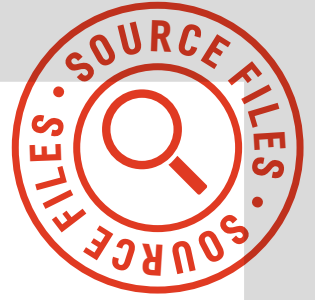
Follow

There are MAJOR holes in the Idlib "sarin
gas" attack story.

Don't believe the mainstream media's
narrative! **#Syria #FakeNews**

Al-Masdar News @TheArabSource
Jumping to conclusions; something is not adding up in #idlib chemical weapons
attack aml.lnk/ncyit #Syria

CARLA ORTIZ



Actress Carla Ortiz — a former star of Baywatch and CSI Miami—turned “reporter” at the height of the worst violence of the Syrian conflict when she visited the frontline of the fighting in Homs and Aleppo. She also met Bashar Al-Assad’s Information Minister, Omran al-Zoubi, in Damascus in May 2016—a man targeted by Western sanctions for his role in human rights abuses.

In postings on Facebook, Ortiz can be seen waving a Syrian government flag in support of the Assad regime whilst on a visit to North Korea with the Australian pro-Assad activist, Tim Anderson, a Professor at the University of Sydney and regular commentator on Russia Today.

On Facebook she posted, “When you ask about the “White Helmets” they [the people of eastern Aleppo] don’t know who they are.... and then they say, ‘Oh, Al Nusra front’ (a terrorist group).”

US television networks CNN and Fox News both carried sympathetic interviews with Ortiz, in which she offers ‘eyewitness insights’ from her time in Aleppo and discusses her forthcoming film Voice of Syria, which promises to focus on “interesting revelations on the White Helmets.”

Russia Today quoted Ortiz as saying the entire Syrian war “was deliberately and meticulously staged” and Russian atrocities in Aleppo faked. Syrian state media also cite her for their propaganda purposes including carrying her call to lift the Western sanctions against Assad’s government.



SWISS PRESS CLUB

Providing a platform for propaganda

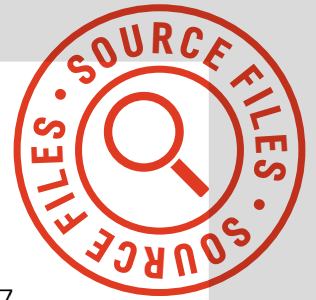
On the first day of a scheduled round of peace talks in Geneva in November 2017, Guy Mettan, Director of the Swiss Press Club, held a press conference, 'They don't care about us'. About white helmets true agenda". The title of the conference was identical to a RT programme broadcast on 22 September 2017 which was also aimed at smearing the group. Mettan screened part of the film to open the conference, encouraging attendees to view the full film online.

When approached by The Syria Campaign and asked who was organising the conference that featured Vanessa Beeley [see page 22] and the head of the Swedish Doctors for Human Rights [see page 30], Mettan replied that it "is not sponsored by anybody" but refused to say who had organised the conference.

In a strongly-worded letter sent to Mettan ahead of the conference, Reporters Without Borders said: "We are totally dissociating ourselves from this event and do not wish to be associated in any way with a conference that welcomes a so-called journalist, Ms. Vanessa Beeley."

In follow-up comments to Swiss national paper Le Temps, the President of Reporters Without Borders Switzerland, Gerard Tschopp said, "The Swiss Press Club can not offer such a platform to propagandists. Whether they are pro-Russian or pro-American, it does not matter."

Reporters Without Borders is due to decide if they will continue to remain members of the Swiss Press Club.



Guy Mettan
@GuyMettan

Follow

I love white helmets. But only the true ones. Not the fake ones. And you? More on my book « Creating russophobia » (Clarity Press, USA/UK, 2017)



1:35 am - 2 Dec 2017

20^{ANS}

Club suisse de la presse

CONFERENCE

The Geneva Press Club - Club suisse de la Presse, has the pleasure to invite the international press, the Swiss press and its members to a **film projection and a conference** entitled :

"They don't care about us".
About white helmets true agenda

With

<p>Vanessa Beeley Independent investigative journalist and photographer from Great Britain specializing in the Middle East. Associate editor at 21st Century Wire.</p>	<p>Richard Labevière French journalist specializing in the Middle East and international terrorism, editor of the internet portal "Proche et Moyen Orient"</p>	<p>Marcello Ferranda De Noli Director of the NGO "Swedish Doctors for Human Rights"</p>
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Tuesday, November 28th 2017 at 3 p.m.

« La Pastorale » Route de Ferney 106, 1202 Genève
(Bus 5 - Direction : Aéroport - Arrêt : Intercontinental)

The "White Helmets" organization acting in Syria is hailed as heroes in some countries, and the West provides millions of dollars to these so-called saviors. However, residents of Aleppo (Syria) claim that "White Helmets" care only about money and saving rebels, but not civilians. People from Fua and Kafraya confirm allegiance of "White Helmets" to world recognized terrorist organizations like Jabhat an-Nusra or Al-Qiada and testimony "White Helmets" participation in public executions. The videos that this organization produces are astounding internet-users all over the world.

The briefing, according to the speakers, is designed to give "a clear view on what is the real agenda of these Hollywood so called "first responders" who received an Oscar for their performance".

I look forward to seeing you on this occasion.
The conference will be followed by drinks.

Guy Mettan, Directeur exécutif

106, route de Ferney, 1202 Genève Tél: +41 22 546 14 44 Fax: +41 22 546 14 45 Email: info@swissclub.ch

STATE-BACKED CONSPIRACIES

No media outlet has been more prolific in its amplification of the smears against the White Helmets than Russian government-funded news sites RT (formerly, Russia Today) or Sputnik News.

On 8 September 2015, three weeks before Russia started its aerial campaign in Syria, Sputnik News carried an interview with Vanessa Beeley, which refers to the White Helmets as a “Soros-sponsored NGO”, despite the group having no ties with the financier and philanthropist. She repeats her accusations that the volunteers’ rescue activities are a “cover-up” and that they “help terrorists”.³²

On the day of the Russian intervention itself, Sputnik News ran another story calling the White Helmets a “controversial quasi-humanitarian organisation”, accusing the group of “cooking up lies”.³³ Quoting Beeley extensively again, it suggested that White Helmets’ reporting on Russian attacks “are part of an information war now being waged against Moscow”. Sputnik News’s French and Turkish websites translated and shared these baseless accusations from Beeley.

Over the following two years Sputnik News ran more than a dozen news stories on the White Helmets, all negative, with the titles such as ‘Al-Qaeda Civil Defense Group White Helmets Rightfully Shut Out of Nobel Prize’³⁴ or ‘Oscar for White Helmets: Hollywood Gave Credibility to ‘Terror-Affiliated’ Group’³⁵ or White Helmets ‘Made Up Syria Gas Attack Story in Campaign for No-fly zone’.³⁶





**PILES OF MILITARY GEAR FILMED
IN FORMER WHITE HELMETS HQ**

**ALEPPO,
SYRIA**



**“Over the following two years
Sputnik News ran more than a
dozen news stories on the White
Helmets, all negative”**



RT ran a similar number of articles also smearing the White Helmets and hosting Vanessa Beeley repeatedly, positioning her as an “independent journalist”, “researcher” and sometimes “peace activist”.³⁷

RT’s series of news reports led by its reporter Murad Gazdiev cast doubt on the work of the White Helmets. In September 2017, RT put out a 16-minute broadcast entitled “They don’t care about us”: Syrians on White Helmets’ true agenda”, which was presented by Gazdiev and featured an interview with Beeley. In the report Gazdiev claims that the White Helmets turned a school into “a munitions workshop that doubled as a hospital”.

Gazdiev’s background as a journalist is unclear. He joined RT in 2014 and appeared shortly after in Kobane to cover the fight against Isis, becoming the channel’s leading voice for English reporting on Syria. Gazdiev has no recorded history of journalism before working for RT and a Wikipedia page about him was deleted by moderators, citing “Non-notable journalist.”³⁸

RT @RT_com Follow

‘We don’t hide it’: White Helmets openly admit being funded by Western govts



‘We don’t hide it’: White Helmets openly admit being funded by Western govts...
A chief liaison officer of the White Helmets has acknowledged to RT that his organization, which claims to be “non-governmental” and “neutral,” receives fun...
rt.com

12:31 am - 20 Oct 2016

173 Retweets 86 Likes

Russian Embassy, UK @RussianEmbassy Follow

Russia welcomes #Oscars award for “White Helmets” film. Indeed, they are actors serving an agenda, not rescuers.
#OscarMistake



1:40 PM - 28 Feb 2017

1,263 Retweets 1,332 Likes

ON THE EDGE OF THE MAINSTREAM

Although the vast majority of journalists and commentators have not been duped by these conspiracy theories, a scattering of pieces have begun to describe the frontline rescue service as “controversial” and analysts close to the Nobel Peace Prize even cited the online smears when describing the White Helmets in their shortlist of potential winners.³⁹

Just as “fake news” enters the Oxford English Dictionary, conspiracy theories are seeping into mainstream discourse with very little scrutiny from social media platforms, professional bodies and readers themselves.

In October 2016, the fringe views of Vanessa Beeley took a step closer to the mainstream when US journalist Max Blumenthal published a piece on a website Alternet suggesting that because the White Helmets had taken funding from a USAID department, the group is “anything but impartial”.⁴⁰ Blumenthal continued his attack on the group in a second piece saying that they follow an “agenda conceived by the Western governments” that back them.⁴² He then goes on later to claim they “are an arm of Al Qaeda. This is absolutely beyond debate.”⁴³

Blumenthal does not credit Vanessa Beeley as the source for any of his allegations, only saying that questions about the White Helmets “have been





"conspiracy theories are seeping into mainstream discourse with very little scrutiny from social media platforms, professional bodies and readers themselves."

raised by only a few marginal websites that generally support the Syrian government". Beeley in response complains of Blumenthal's piece on Twitter that "most of it is cribbed f[ro]m genuine researchers who are not credited."⁴⁴

Following the sarin gas attack in Syria in April 2017, Blumenthal was invited onto RT to comment on the incident. He poured cold water on the idea that the Syrian government could have been responsible, saying "it would have been politically suicidal for the Assad government to have authorised a sarin gas attack in an area like Khan Sheikhoun that has very little strategic significance."⁴⁵

He went on to say, "what we've seen is a beefing up of insurgent propaganda as it's known in the intelligence community. Basically helping to provide the rebels and opposition activists with cameras and media gear." He continued, "one of the major forces involved in insurgent propaganda are the so-called White Helmets...these are the groups that produce the images that we saw from Khan Sheikhoun."

On 26 October 2017, UN investigators concluded that the Syrian government was behind the attack. The UN's Joint Investigative Mechanism interviewed over 30 witnesses and reviewed 2,247 photographs, 1,284 video files, 120 audio files and 639 documents. An in-depth laboratory study into the chemistry of sarin revealed that "the nerve gas used was very likely to have been made from the same precursor chemical that had come from the original stockpile of Syria". Edmond Mulet, Head of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism, said "the panel is confident that when taken together, all those elements constituted unmistakable evidence that Syria was responsible for the use of sarin at Khan Shaykun".⁴⁷ Russia has since used its veto at the UN Security Council to stop the work of the investigating team.⁴⁶

"the panel is confident that when taken together, all those elements constituted unmistakable evidence that Syria was responsible for the use of sarin at Khan Shaykun."

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying an article on the AlterNet website. The page has a dark blue header with the 'ALTERNET' logo and a navigation menu including 'ENVIRONMENT / FOOD', 'ECONOMY', 'EDUCATION', 'RIGHTS', 'MEDIA / CULTURE', 'HEALTH', 'ACTIVISM', 'THE PERSONAL', and 'TRUMP TRAUMA'. The article title is 'How the White Helmets Became International Heroes While Pushing U.S. Military Intervention and Regime Change in Syria'. Below the title is a sub-headline: 'Created by Western governments and popularized by a top PR firm, the White Helmets are saving civilians while lobbying for airstrikes.' The author is listed as 'By Max Blumenthal / AlterNet' and the date is 'October 2, 2016, 9:03 AM GMT'. There are social media sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and Email, along with a comment count of '93 COMMENTS'. On the right side of the page, there is a weather widget for Warrington, GB showing a temperature of 36° and a 'Sign Up!' box for the AlterNet Daily Newsletter with a 'SUBSCRIBE' button.



CONCLUSION

This report has demonstrated how online bots and trolls, boosting an unlikely constellation of bloggers, journalists, politicians, celebrities, fake think tanks and medical organisations, have contributed to a Russian-backed disinformation campaign to smear Syria's rescue workers, the White Helmets.

These lies are now dominating the online debate about these humanitarians and unless media organisations are vigilant, they risk polluting mainstream discourse too.

It is the sincere hope of the The Syria Campaign that those reading this report commit to take concrete steps to help defend the truth in this conflict. It is the very least the Syrian people deserve.

- **Technology companies**

- Provide users with a way to report accounts that look suspicious
- Consider a peer-verification system where users can vouch for others they have met offline
- When an account is suspended, notify all users who have come into contact with that disinformation. Users have a right to know that they have been misled.

- **Social media users**

- Examine the sources and evidence behind the news you consume
- Avoid sharing content which is not from trusted sources.

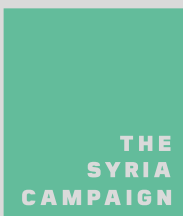
- **News organisations**

- Recognise that the aim of disinformation is not to win an argument but to cloud the truth. Do not give conspiracy theorists a platform in the name of balance
- Be careful who you recognise as journalists. It can be used as a label to legitimise propagandists who do not follow any journalistic code of conduct.

- **Democratic governments**

- Hold technology companies to account. Disinformation on Syria, as well as in other well-documented areas, is polluting the public debate central to any healthy democracy
- Invest in educating people about this new threat. Publics should be more aware of organised efforts to confuse them on key issues.

- 1 Attacks and fatalities recorded by the Syria Civil Defence.
- 2 <https://twitter.com/VanessaBeeley/status/660159072457637888>
- 3 <http://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/press/2016/3/56e6e3249/syria-conflict-5-years-biggest-refugee-displacement-crisis-time-demands.html>
- 4 <http://beta.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-kremlin-oks-troops-20150930-story.html>
- 5 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/second-anniversary-russian-intervention-syria-5233-civilians-killed>
- 6 <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2017/10/01/47132/>
- 7 <http://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick>
- 8 <http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/uploads/tollen/death-toll-en.png>
- 9 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/05/the-guardian-view-on-the-nobel-peace-prize-give-it-to-syrias-white-helmets>
- 10 Time periods analysed are as follows: The Khan Sheikhou chemical attack (4-7 April 2017), the Nobel Peace Prize 2016 (3-8 October 2016), the Nobel Peace Prize 2017 (3-7 April 2017), the killing of seven White Helmets in Idlib (11-14 August 2017), Aleppo Offensive (6 November - 22 December 2016), Netflix Film The White Helmets wins Oscar (26-27 February 2017), Murder of Jo Cox MP (16-17 June 2016), White Helmets share Rising Global Peace Forum peace prize with Jo Cox MP (12 November 2016), White Helmets win Right Livelihood Award (22 September 2016), White Helmets win Tipperary Peace Prize (6-31 August 2017).
- 11 <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/14re6InCShezrwx6KoeV3CCcaARblUwj7ZsVCqv8k/edit#gid=0>
- 12 <http://21stcenturywire.com/2016/09/23/exclusive-the-real-syria-civil-defence-expose-natos-white-helmets-as-terrorist-linked-imposters/>
- 13 <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/364105-aleppo-white-helmets-fraudulent/>
- 14 <https://thewallwillfall.org/about/>
- 15 <http://archive.is/pTqo6>
- 16 <http://21stcenturywire.com/2014/02/21/sandy-hook-game-changer-solid-new-evidence-of-a-cover-up-presented/>
- 17 <http://21stcenturywire.com/2016/09/10/out-in-the-open-911-15-years-of-a-transparent-lie/>
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This report was written by The Syria Campaign, with research and analysis from social media intelligence firm Graphika and research from freelance journalist and researcher Shilpa Jindia.