

Hussam Hlaak: 'Tech companies need to know who their clients are'



*In its early days, the Arab Spring, the popular unrest that began in 2010 in the Middle East and North Africa, seemed to be evidence of the power of social media to bring about democracy. The illusion didn't last very long. Governments learned quickly to use technology to suppress dissent. But social network platforms have been playing an important role in the Syrian war that started in 2011. "If it weren't for social media the Syrian cause wouldn't have reached such a wide number of people around the world", says Hussam Hlaak, CEO of [The White Helmets](#), a group of volunteers who rush to bombing sights to search and rescue survivors. Since the organisation started in 2012, 159 volunteers have died doing their work. Hlaak believes technology is an important tool to avoid human suffering, depending on who uses it. "It's very important for tech companies to know who their clients are", he told LSE Business Review's managing editor, **Helena Vieira**. They sat down for an interview on 7 November during Web Summit, in Lisbon. Hlaak spoke in Arabic. Ibrahim Olabi, founder and executive director at the Syrian Legal Development Programme ([SLDP](#)), translated.*

Could you please explain what is The White Helmets and what you do?

We're a group of volunteers, 3600 today, working in non-government in Syria, search and rescue, fire fighting, and helping with emergency services at a time when there aren't any.

Who finances the White Helmets?

Mainly states, the Friends of Syria states, such as the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, Germany, the US, but also individual contributions.

Does technology help you in your financing needs in any way?

If it wasn't for technology, which helps us show the people outside what is happening in Syria, they would never have seen what is going on and would never have decided to fund and support us. If it wasn't for social media we wouldn't have reached these people to start with.

Syrian cities have been destroyed by bombing. I assume the whole infrastructure is gone. How do you communicate with each other? Is it possible to use the internet at all?

There are various ways, starting with walkie-talkies, WhatsApp. Internet services come via satellite.

Who provides the satellite services? Is it a Syrian service? Do you have to pay to subscribe?

Sometimes we can use ADSL, if it's there, but mainly we use a satellite connection. It's through a company called Thuraya. You just buy the subscription and use a router.

Where are you based, in Syria or the UK?

I live between Northern Syria and Southern Turkey.

How does economic life keep moving in such an extreme situation? How do people buy and sell bread, or tomatoes, or any type of food?

The situation is very bad economically. The infrastructure is not there. There's no electricity, not enough water, and people survive on humanitarian aid.

The war has been going on for seven years now, more or less. Do you see any chances that this situation will be solved any time soon?

We can't see any solution in the horizon. We've seen some areas where fighting has been deescalated, but we've also seen that being breached, so we can't see the end now. There'll be no solution for Syria if the perpetrators have not been held accountable. There can't be any lasting solutions. And it seems that there's no political intention to achieve that. Recently it has been confirmed that the Syrian government used chemical weapons, but we haven't seen any moves towards dealing with it.

Why do you think the West took this hands-off approach to Syria?

Anything like this goes through the United Nations and there's Russia there. They veto and don't allow any action regarding Syria.

Do you think Syria risks becoming a satellite of Russia?

I don't believe that Syrians will accept that because Russia is playing a big role in the bloodshed that's happening in our country. We just can't accept that.

I read that there has been a disinformation campaign against the White Helmets, trying to spread "fake news". How do you counter that?

We counter it by continuing to work. They want us to stop what we're doing but we'll continue to expose what's happening and we'll push back. Our work is one of the main reasons why people can see the crimes committed by the Syrian government and its allies.

Do you have faith in social media? Did it help Syria at all?

If it weren't for social media the Syrian cause wouldn't have reached the numbers of people around the world.

I was thinking that social media helped spark unrest in many parts of the world but in the end governments could listen in, control and use social media to fight the people too...

Of course the Syrian government has used social media against the people, but we use social media to try and get momentum and get people to put pressure on the government. And social media is a very good tool for that.

And you get Western people to pressure their governments too...

We believe that people have the power to put pressure on their governments. Social media helps us get the view out that we can't get any sort of peace ...

The documentary The White Helmets won the Oscar for best short documentary. Did that change, or help improve anything for the White Helmets?

It helped people in the world see a part of what Syrians go through every day. It didn't provide a difference per se, but it helped shed light on what's happening.

Why are you here at Web Summit and what is the message that you want to convey?

We're here to bring to light the importance of technology in countering human suffering. We've been using technology since day 1, but it's not sufficient yet and we are trying to push technology companies to fulfil all manners of saving Syrian lives.

If you had a chance to sit face to face with the heads of big technology companies, what would you ask them?

First of all technological support in documenting crimes that are happening in Syria, being able to preserve that evidence, so that it becomes a tool for accountability; being able to fight propaganda, fake news and false information that is coming out there and takes away from what is happening in Syria.

Is there anything else that I could ask, that I haven't asked, that might help your cause?

It's very important for tech companies to know who their clients are because if the right technology ends up in the wrong hands, it can help criminals and further facilitate their crimes. They need to know who they're selling to. It's important to raise awareness of technology but also to raise awareness to what's happening and getting our voice out to the world.

Can you give me an example of technology being in the wrong hands and not knowing who your clients are?

There's a case now in different countries about selling intelligence technology to governments and being able to, for example, hack into Skype, listen to calls, and a lot of these things. But if you Google it, you'll find a lot of cases now in different countries against companies who have sold intelligence technologies to governments and that ended up helping them persecute and torture people. Spyware, surveillance, stuff like that.

You would ask tech companies and Western governments to help stop the sale of surveillance equipment and technology?

Yes, to stop selling it to any criminals, regardless of who they are. We don't want them to get the surveillance, because that is facilitating the crime, and helping them.



- *This Q&A is part of a series of interviews during the [Web Summit](#) conference in Lisbon, 6-9 November 2017. The conversation was edited for clarity.*
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