DEADLY DISINFORMATION

How online conspiracies about Syria cause real-world harm

Since Syrians took to the streets more than 11 years ago demanding freedom from decades of dictatorship, the Syrian regime has used violence and disinformation as tools to silence those who dare to oppose it, especially those brave enough to expose the war crimes being committed.

Civilians, doctors, humanitarians and human rights defenders have all faced real-life consequences of online harms. Their experiences are testament to the deadly cost of disinformation.

Although there is a [trove of evidence](#) of torture, chemical weapons use, and the indiscriminate and targeted bombing of civilians, a relatively small number of conspiracy theorists – sometimes aided by a [Russian-backed disinformation campaign](#), other times inspired by Russia's disinformation [talking points](#) – have managed to distort the facts, endanger people's lives, and cast long shadows of doubt over policy debates on Syria; in some cases stalling political action by the international community when it was sorely needed.

New data gathered and analysed by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) for this report shows that disinformation about the conflict in Syria has created a dangerous ecosystem that permeates beyond the online bubble of social media and impacts both lives and government policies in the real world.

The disinformation campaign has been devastating for those who are brave enough to risk everything to document human rights violations, as well as for survivors of chemical attacks.

The [unprecedented](#) use of social media in the Syria conflict shed new light on the evolution of information warfare. Indeed, the war in Syria was the first major conflict to be played out online, creating what researchers have dubbed "[a dangerous illusion of unmediated information flows](#)".

A new timeline shows that human rights defenders, humanitarians and war crimes survivors have been subject to at least seven years of persistent and painful online harassment and hate-filled disinformation, with very little action from governments or social media platforms.

Multiple policymakers interviewed for the report said the systematic attacks cloaked policy debates with uncertainty and confusion, stalling government decision-making in the face of some of the most egregious crimes of our time and leading them to shirk their responsibility to protect civilians from mass atrocities.

Confusion and doubt amongst policy makers at the highest levels is enabling anti-asylum policies, normalisation of the Assad regime, and has emboldened Putin to employ the same tactics in Ukraine.

Equally important, disinformation campaigns threaten to rewrite history and, in doing so, prevent true justice and accountability for Syrians. Disinformation hides and twists the truth; and without the truth, a peaceful future for Syria and its people will remain out of reach.

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A NOTE ON OUR METHODS

The Syria Campaign asked The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) to conduct research to examine how the echo chamber of disinformation on Syria has affected the offline world. Over the course of 12 weeks between December 2021 and April 2022, ISD analysed tens of thousands of English-language tweets and Facebook and Instagram posts that targeted Syrian activists and humanitarian organisations with disinformation narratives between 2015 and 2021. The project has resulted in one of the most comprehensive deep dives into Syrian disinformation to date.

ISD and The Syria Campaign identified 28 individuals, outlets and organisations who have spread disinformation about the Syrian conflict. The digital presence of these actors was strongest on Twitter, with all of them having an account, while 21 of these actors also have active public Facebook profiles.

The research team used Brandwatch, a commercial social listening tool, and CrowdTangle, a Meta-owned research platform, to search through all content posted on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram by the selected actors between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2021 (approximately 900,000 tweets).

In order to restrict the focus to disinformation narratives, the team developed and tested an ad hoc dictionary of keywords and phrases that were used to filter social media posts to only those that contained false or misleading information about the Syrian conflict. This resulted in 47,000 tweets and 817 Facebook posts. As all of the actors investigated in this report were present on Twitter, and the volume of disinformation posts was far higher on Twitter than on Facebook, the bulk of our digital analysis focused on Twitter.

Once all disinformation tweets were collected, these were plotted by volume over time to form an unprecedented year-by-year timeline of disinformation regarding the conflict. The research team then conducted a qualitative review of content during periods in which disinformation posts peaked in frequency, in order to determine the topics and real-world events that drove those peaks.

> While the timeline for this particular analysis begins in 2015, the Syrian regime has used online attacks and disinformation from the beginning of the conflict, denying protests were taking place or making false claims about the revolution. However, 2015 marked Russia's entrance into the conflict, which upped the stakes for humanitarians and human rights defenders on the frontline.

As with any study reliant on social media data, our digital research has some limitations. First, we deliberately restricted the focus to a few select actors with a track record of producing or spreading disinformation around the conflict. As such, this research should not be interpreted as a comprehensive assessment of any possible form of online disinformation on the topic of Syria during these years.

Second, the use of a keyword-based approach to identify disinformation content requires the necessary caveat that this list of terms may not be exhaustive and, despite a testing and validation process, some posts flagged as relevant may not meet the threshold of disinformation.

Finally, Brandwatch – the tool we used to analyse Twitter content – periodically removes content that is no longer publicly available on Twitter (in accordance with Twitter's Terms of Service). As this research was conducted over three months, there may be slight discrepancies in the total number of posts depending on the exact moment at which each data point was produced.

> The research team also conducted 29 interviews to uncover the impact disinformation has upon people and policies. We spoke to Syrians who have been consistently targeted by disinformation, current and former policymakers on Syria, and international policy experts. Some of those we spoke to asked not to be named or quoted directly in the report so in some cases we have summarised their experiences or anonymised quotes.
>
> Of course, it's impossible to precisely measure the true impact of disinformation on individuals' lives, public opinion or foreign policy, but the insights of those on the frontlines and at the decision making table go some way towards understanding the implications.

HOW SYRIA CONSPIRACIES SPREAD

"For us, in the beginning, we couldn't understand what was happening. In the early days, when I saw the first Vanessa Beeley piece, we really thought this could just be someone who didn't have enough correct info, and we should contact her to explain. But then with some research, we realised it's deliberate and systematic. It's not because of lack of info, they know what they're doing."

– Farouq Habib, White Helmets Deputy Manager

Picture credit: White Helmets

Vanessa Beeley is a self-described independent journalist who said meeting Assad was her "proudest moment". Her conspiracy theories have been provided as evidence by Russia at the UN Security Council. She also suggested the Charlie Hebdo terror attack in Paris was staged and that the global COVID pandemic is a "big-pharma generated hoaxathon".

In 2015, most English-language disinformation posts on Syria in our data set came from Beeley, but by 2017 a handful of other individuals were also spreading the same Kremlin talking points. These accounts are highly active, recycling posts time and again and disseminating content across different outlets.

Some of them are core creators of the conspiracy theories, joining regime-organised press trips once an area has been seized by Russian and Syrian troops, reporting their version of events, even writing about alleged rebel chemical weapons factories that were later found to be non-existent.

There is a vast trove of evidence implicating the Syrian regime in over 300 chemical weapons attacks since the conflict began, including strikes using internationally prohibited nerve agents such as sarin that have killed thousands of people.

Despite extensive video, documentary and witness evidence of the crimes committed by the Syrian regime, unfounded conspiracy theories still manage to find some support – not least among a group of British academics.

One journalist who has herself been subjected to online attacks for exposing the disinformation on Syria told our research team: "The burden of evidence is so enormous it seems impossible to doubt, and yet they still manage to do it. The more

evidence there is, the more they have to pick holes in and claim it's fake."
– Chloe Hadjimatheou, BBC Journalist.

Since 2020, Aaron Maté at the Grayzone has overtaken Beeley as the most prolific spreader of disinformation among the 28 actors we investigated. An article that he wrote for the Grayzone where he attacks Bellingcat for its contributions to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) was the most shared link in our data set in both 2020 and 2021. He, like Beeley, also appeared at the UN at the invitation of Russia, where he attempted to defend the Syrian government against accusations of chemical weapons use.

> "The burden of evidence is so enormous it seems impossible to doubt, and yet they still manage to do it. The more evidence there is, the more they have to pick holes in and claim it's fake."
>
> – Chloe Hadjimatheou, BBC Journalist.

The Grayzone describes itself as "an independent news website producing original investigative journalism on politics and empire" and it regularly seeks to minimise and deny human rights abuses by authoritarian regimes, for example its attempts to discredit the well-documented genocide against Uyghurs in Xinjiang by the Chinese government.

Some celebrities have regurgitated the conspiracy theories about the White Helmets. This report finds that two of the most shared disinformative posts on Facebook were by Roger Waters of Pink Floyd – the first claimed "the White Helmets probably murdered 34 women and children to dress the scene that sorry day in Douma" and the second is a harmful misreading of the OPCW report into the attack.

"The work ahead feels very hard because one of the most powerful parts of the revolution was that exciting moment when activists with phone cameras shattered the information blackout of the Assad regime and through activism got the truth out to the world. But we have seen how it cost them their lives and now that moment has gone."

"It's so insulting that a group of Western conspiracy theorists think they hold a higher moral standard but just spread their lies, fueled by the big machine."
– Lina Sergie Attar, founder and CEO of Karam Foundation, Syrian-American architect, writer and The Syria Campaign board chairperson.

A TIMELINE OF DISINFORMATION

ISD found a total of 47,000 disinformation tweets by the 28 identified disinformation actors, 19,000 of which were original posts.

The 28 disinformation accounts investigated for this report had a combined followership of 3 million total accounts, 1.8 million of whom are unique followers. However, retweets by followers have likely carried their false messages much further – the 19,000 original tweets by these actors were found to have been retweeted over 671,000 times.

While much of the disinformation about Syria has mainly been spread by individuals, official Russia government accounts have also played a key role in creating and spreading false content. Researchers tracked three of these accounts – the Russian Embassy to Syria, the Russian Embassy to the UK, and the Russian Mission to the UN – and found that they played a particularly prominent role around the biggest peak of disinformation following the Douma chemical attack in April 2018. Those three accounts racked up 13,000 retweets in April alone – 13% of all disinformation retweets in that time period.

Among the 47,000 tweets posted or shared by the disinformation actors in this report, a keywords-based analysis identified the three false narratives that were spread most frequently.

1. False claims about the work of the White Helmets to save lives in Syria.

2. The denial or distortion of facts about the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons.

3. Attacks against the findings of reports by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) on Syria.

670,000 Retweets

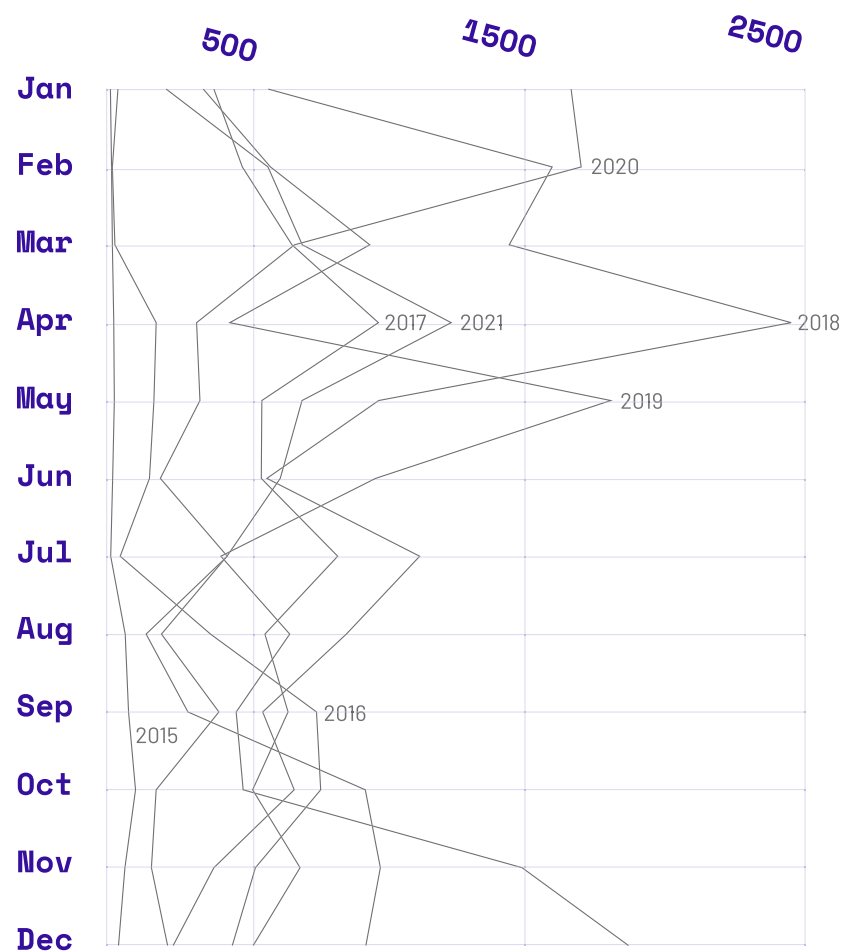19,000 Tweets

28 Profiles

47K Tweets

817 Facebook posts

Timeline of disinformation
Number of tweets collected

When you chart the volume of disinformation tweets collected for this report by year and month you can clearly see the spikes and lows of disinformation targeting Syrian humanitarians and human rights defenders on Twitter between 2015 and 2021. Unsurprisingly the spikes, which represent a mixture of topics and claims, often coincide with online moments and real world events listed on the following pages.

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2015

The Syrian regime has used online attacks and disinformation from the beginning of the conflict, denying protests were taking place or making false claims about the revolution. However, 2015 marked Russia's ramped up involvement in the conflict, which upped the stakes for humanitarians and human rights defenders on the frontline.

- **28 August:**
  Vanessa Beeley attacks the White Helmets for posting pictures with kittens.

- **2 September:**
  The death of Aylan Kurdi photographed lifeless on a beach in Turkey shocks the world and raises international concern over the crisis in Syria.

- **30 September**:
  Russia's parliament grants Putin's request to launch airstrikes in Syria.

- **13 September:**
  Beeley accuses White Helmets of being in league with Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organisations, claiming the footage they gather as they rescue civilians from bombed-out buildings is staged.

- **22 October:**
  Carmen Ranieri becomes a frequent poster and retweeter alongside Beeley. They retweet claims the Ghouta Sarin gas attack in 2013 was a false flag attack.

2016

Disinformation increases significantly from the year before and so does the bombing of humanitarians on the ground in Syria. The crisis receives global attention as international media commits to covering the intense attacks on Aleppo.

- **July:**
  Beeley visits Syria and meets with Assad, according to her own blog.

- **17 August:**
  A photo of a young boy sitting blood-stained and shocked in an ambulance following the bombing of his home captures the world's attention. The photographer Mahmoud Raslan receives a barrage of accusations and threats .

- **18 August:**
  The White Helmets are nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

- **16 September:**
  White Helmets Netflix documentary is released.

- **19 September:**
  A Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoy is attacked, killing around 20 civilians and destroying 18 trucks of aid.

- **23 September:**
  Three White Helmets centres and vehicles are bombed in Aleppo.

- **Sept-Oct:**
  Conspiracy theorists attack then -7year-old Syrian blogger Bana al-Abed who, with her mother, were using Twitter and YouTube to share their experience of living under siege in Aleppo with the world.

- **8 October:**
  Russia vetoes calls for end to bombing of Aleppo at the UN Security Council.

- **November:**
  Beeley is invited to Moscow "to report on the illegal NATO state intervention and dirty war on Syria", according to her own blog.

- **December:**
  The Assad regime takes Aleppo.

- **9 December:**
  Canadian independent journalist Eva Bartlett appears on a Syrian government panel at the UN, alleging that the White Helmets stage rescues and "recycle" children in their fake footage – a version of the talk has since been viewed 4.5 million times on Facebook.

2017

The volume of disinformation posts more than doubled compared to 2016, with many of the accounts we investigated sharing articles focused on the White Helmets or false claims about the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack.

- **27 February:**
  The White Helmets Netflix documentary wins an Oscar.

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- **4 April:**
  The Khan Shaykhun chemical attack in Idlib kills more than 80 people.

- **29 June:**
  The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) release a report, which concludes the Khan Shaykhun attack used sarin, a nerve agent, or sarin-like substances.

- **12 August:**
  Seven White Helmets volunteers are shot dead at their centre in Idlib, prompting condemnation and messages of solidarity from governments and individuals online but also attacks and false claims from conspiracy theorists.

- **23 September:**
  Humanitarian aid reached Eastern Ghouta after more than four years under siege by regime forces.

- **8 October:**
  Beeley's self-described "proudest moment", meeting Assad .

- **17 November:**
  At the UNSC, Russia blocks the mandate renewal of the Joint Investigation Mechanism formed to determine the perpetrators of chemical weapons attacks in Syria.

- **December:**
  Guardian journalist Olivia Solon receives death threats and a barrage of hate for writing about the Russia-backed disinformation campaign targeting Syria's White Helmets

• **2018**

Another large increase in volume of disinformation from the previous year and the most active year for disinformation posts from the 28 accounts identified in ISD's research.

- **February:**
  Syrian regime and Russia begin a seven-week bombing offensive on Eastern Ghouta.

- **7 April:**
  A chemical gas attack in Douma, kills at least 42 people and injures hundreds, one week after international media and most photographers left under intense shelling.

- **13 April:**
  The US, Britain and France respond with a coordinated strike targeting research, storage, and military targets owned by the Syrian regime.

- **13 April:**
  Roger Waters of Pink Floyd calls the White Helmets a "fake organisation that exists only to create propaganda for the jihadists and terrorists" on stage in Barcelona.

- **6 July:**
  The Fact-Finding Mission of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), issues an interim report about the chemical attack in Douma.

- **22 July:**
  White Helmets volunteers and their families are evacuated from Daraa and resettled in the UK, Canada, Germany and elsewhere after an intense assault on the area by Syrian and Russian forces.

- **17 August:**
  The Trump administration ends funding for Syria stabilisation projects but continues to fund humanitarian work.

- **18 September:**
  US journalist Max Blumenthal mocks civilians fearing chemical weapons attacks.

- **20 December:**
  The White Helmets are accused of organ theft, staging attacks and other conspiracies at a Panel Discussion on White Helmets Organisation in Syria organised by Russia.

• **2019**

This year is almost entirely focused on different iterations of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons reports, little other content is discussed at scale.

- **1 March:**
  The Fact-Finding Mission of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), issues its final report on the Douma chemical attack, finding "reasonable grounds that the use of a toxic chemical as a weapon has taken place on 7 April 2018. This toxic chemical contained reactive chlorine".

- **April:**
  In direct violation of the Russia-Turkey deal, Russian and Syrian regime forces launch a military campaign on Idlib. Over the following months, over half a million are forced to leave their homes or temporary shelters.

- **28 April - 11 June:**
  24 health facilities and one ambulance attacked by Russian and Syrian forces, including four hospitals in 24 hours.

- **May-December:**
  A series of leaked emails and draft documents by two former OPCW employees, covered by the Mail on Sunday and Fox News, were used by pro-Russian accounts as evidence that Douma was faked, even though they were later found to lack credibility.

- **30 July:**
  Two-thirds of the UN Security Council ask the UN's Secretary General to launch an inquiry into the 24 attacks on Syrian hospitals.

- **December:**
  Denmark begins reviewing and then revoking residency permits for Syrian refugees, stating that parts of Syria were no longer considered sufficiently dangerous to give grounds for international protection.

• 2020

Grayzone articles, mainly written by Aaron Maté, are widely shared in 2020. The Grayzone describes itself as "an independent news website producing original investigative journalism on politics and empire".

- **21 January:**
  UN Security Council hearing about the Douma attack

- **6 February:**
  An official Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons inquiry shows that two former employees hailed as whistleblowers were "individuals who could not accept that their views were not backed by evidence"

- **February:**
  Russia and the Syrian regime continue pounding Idlib forcing 700,000 people to flee their homes or shelters.

- **17 June:**
  The US announces the toughest sanctions against Damascus known as the "Caesar Act", with wider powers to freeze assets of anyone dealing with Syria, regardless of nationality, and covering more sectors from construction to energy

- **9 November:**
  The BBC releases Mayday, a podcast by journalist Chloe Hadjimatheou that investigates the story of disinformation against the White Helmets.
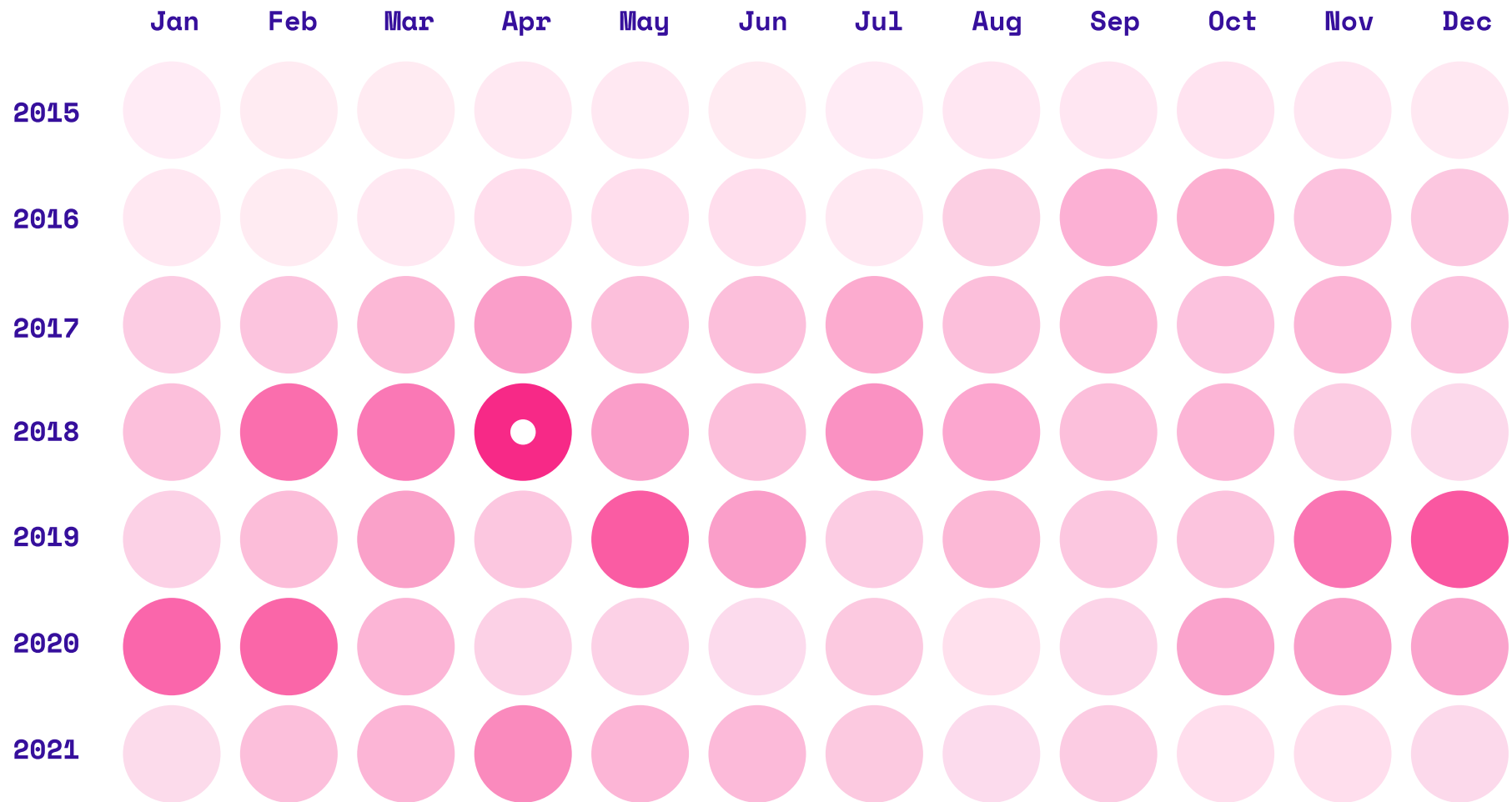
• 2021

The volume of tweets dropped in 2021 but the focus on the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons investigation into Douma's chemical weapons attack remained a central topic with many false claims being recycled and reused.

- **24 Feb:**
  A German court sentences a former Syrian intelligence officer to four-and-a-half years in jail for complicity in crimes against humanity.

- **March:**
  Ten years since the start of the Syrian revolution.

- **26 March:**
  The BBC publishes "The UK professor and the fake Russian agent," by Hadjimatheou. The story sheds light on covert efforts by a member of the Working Group on Syria Propaganda and Media to discredit the work of Europe-based war crimes monitoring organisations.

- **April:**
  Irish MEP Mick Wallace amplifies claims in an EU committee session that the "so-called chemical attack [in Douma]… most likely was staged with the help of the White Helmets." MEP Clare Daly spreads similar claims.Their comments are picked up and shared by Piers Robinson and criticised by fellow MEPs for amplifying "fake news".

- **16 April:**
  Aaron Mate, a journalist at the Grayzone, speaks at "OPCW cover-up" event held at UNSC hosted by Russia.

- **9 May:**
  A thread from Beeley attacking the NGOs and linking humanitarian efforts in Syria to COVID19- disinformation and conspiracy theories.

- **23 June:**
  Spike in repeated and recycled claims that the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons investigation into the Douma chemical attack was flawed. According to ISD's data, Aaron Maté spread these claims most frequently.

2015-2021 disinformation hotspots

No. of tweets

0   2,500

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2015												
2016												
2017												
2018												
2019												
2020												
2021												

TEN WAYS DISINFORMATION HAS HAD AN IMPACT IN THE REAL WORLD

1. LIES COST LIVES

The White Helmets first caught the attention of the world because of their heroic rescues of civilians from bombed-out buildings. As soon as frontline volunteers started wearing go-pro cameras on their helmets to document their work, they became a threat to the Assad regime. They were capturing and broadcasting to the world the horrors of the conflict almost in real time.

White Helmets volunteers have become victims of the most ferocious disinformation campaign waged in the conflict and are by far the most frequently attacked targets within our data set, with more than 21,000 tweets designed to discredit and harm their first responders. In 2015, they were the focus of almost all conspiracy theories spread by the accounts investigated for this report.

The most common false accusation spread by disinformation accounts is to label the frontline responders terrorists, an attempt to provide justification for their deliberate targeting by double tap strikes, when Russian or regime aircraft bomb an area and then return to the scene once rescue workers have arrived. To date, 296 volunteers have been killed in the line of duty since 2012.

Doctors and health workers, along with most people living in areas outside of regime control, are also often labelled terrorists - an accusation designed to buy impunity for the bombing of civilian homes, hospitals and schools. Humanitarians are portrayed as, according to Vanessa Beeley, legitimate targets for attack.

"The regime and Russia makes our lifesaving work extremely risky through double-tap attacks. When we go to save people from a bombed site, they re-target the same area in order to kill the first responders. They also target our centres and our homes in order to kill us and our families so that people think twice before volunteering. I live in constant fear of going home and never seeing my family or hearing their voices again. I am committed to saving lives, and they are targeting us for that. This constant fear makes me feel under pressure all the time, such that I could collapse at any moment."

– Hamid Kutini, White Helmets volunteer, Northwest Syria

"Russian and Syrian TV accused us of being terrorists as they intensified airstrikes and attacks on hospitals. After they gained control of an area – Hama, Aleppo, Ghouta – the disinformation attacks would intensify. They'd produce detailed reports with all kinds of lies."

– Dr Basel Termanini, Chairman SAMS Foundation

Mahmoud Raslan, a photographer from Aleppo, became the target of disinformation during the bombing of Aleppo after a photo he took went viral. "Within a very short period of time, the Syrian and Russian regimes began targeting my Facebook account, sending me messages threatening to bomb my home," he said.

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Picture credit: White Helmets   13

2. CONFUSION AND DOUBT PROVIDING COVER FOR POLITICAL INACTION

Disinformation about the Syrian conflict has made it easier for governments to shirk their responsibility to act, interviews with policy makers showed.

All the confusion, doubt and uncertainty was convenient, interviewees said, as cover for inaction on Syria. Government officials would use Russian conspiracies and talking points to support their case and abet decisions to allow atrocities to continue in Syria without accountability.

One former Western diplomat said, "It's either that they genuinely think that these things might have some truth to it, or that it's a convenient thing to latch onto to avoid making the decisions that we want them to make, say in the Security Council or elsewhere."

"Those of us who were really in the trenches working on this, dismissed the disinformation. But I think for others, it aided and abetted a culture of risk aversion that should something go wrong, we're going to be held liable for it."

– Wa'el Alzayat, CEO of Emgage and former Senior Policy Advisor to Ambassador Samantha Power

Whilst almost all those we spoke to claimed they were not themselves susceptible to the lies spread by conspiracy theorists, most pointed to instances when their diplomacy or efforts to cement policy were hampered by colleagues or counterparts who were swayed by false claims.

Data analysis found that some of the 28 members investigated for this report are followed or shared by public figures, opinion formers, local politicians and policy makers from around the world. Everyone interviewed for this report recognised that the disinformation has permeated beyond the extreme corners of the internet, reaching their constituents, mainstream media outlets, and even some members of the diplomatic community.

"Previously, information on Syria primarily came from media outlets or select research organisations... When the Syrian war broke out all the sudden these images and videos spoke a million words and it became clear the Syrian war was unfolding in real time. That went on to challenge the basis of American policy on things such as mass atrocities and response to atrocities. Promises like 'never again' became hollow."

– Former American government official

"India and Brazil, mainstream actors, regularly on the Security Council with aspirations for permanent seats in a reformed Council – they will, if not specifically talk about these things, they'll at least allude to them: 'the whole story's not clear', kind of commentary. So sometimes these narratives do permeate among some states and it has the effect not necessarily of convincing them, but of muddying the waters and making decision-making a little less straightforward."

– Former Western Diplomat

Picture credit: Guardian Article

"On chemical weapons, on the dissolution of the Joint Investigation Mechanism; that was an absolute blitz of disinformation. It's easy to spread disinformation when you're blocking the inspection mechanism from going to verify the facts on the ground. Don't let them in, spread disinformation, accuse them of having misled the international community, and then dissolve the mechanism. If there's an example of a successful disinformation campaign it's probably that one."

– International advocate working with civil society and the UN

"The point [of the disinformation] is ultimately to cast doubt upon the legitimacy and integrity of the people doing this kind of [policy] work and create friction and to raise questions in the mind of the people who are undecided [about policy decisions]. That's a key point."

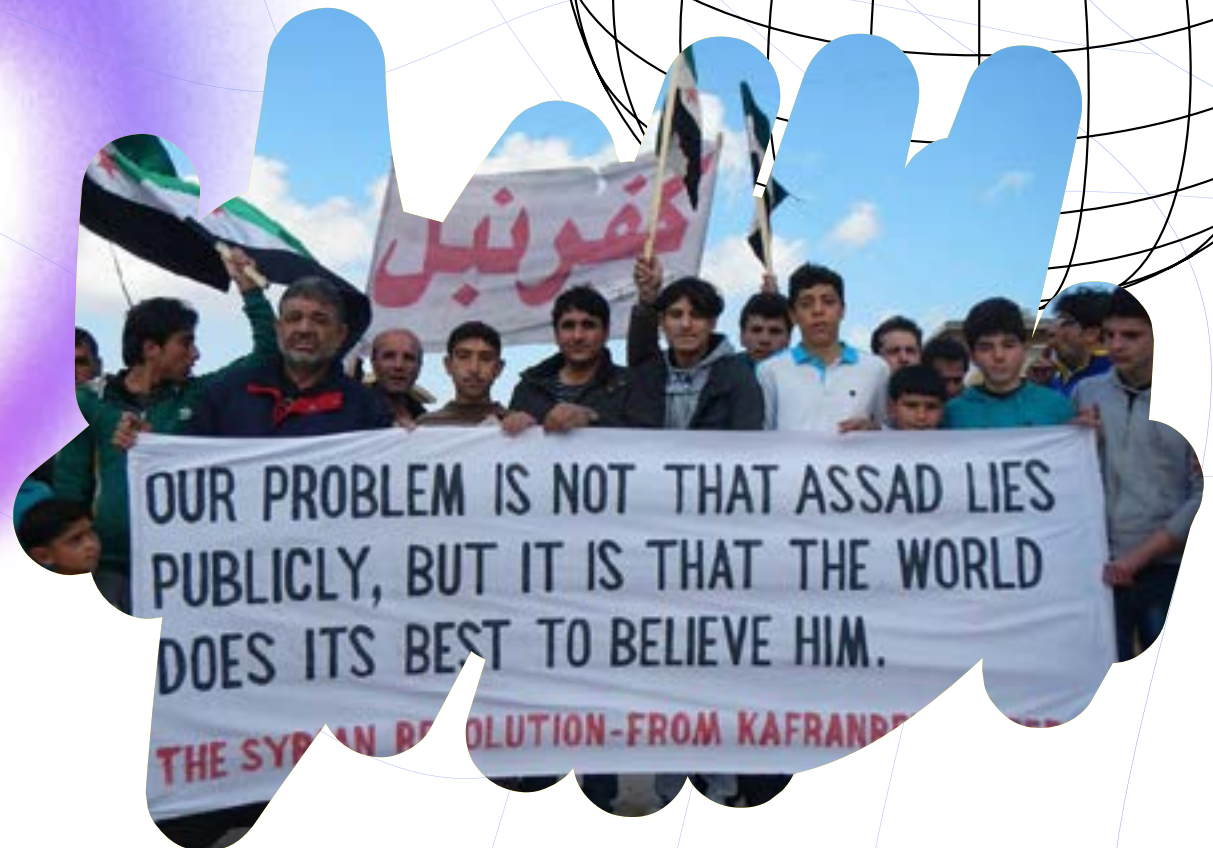–Senior diplomat, formerly ambassador in the MENA region.

James Jeffrey, the former US Secretary's Special Representative for Syria Engagement, pointed to the influence of disinformation on policy by explaining that regime and Russian talking points created incoherent policy.

"Nobody believed the Russians were not carpet-bombing Syrian cities. Nobody believed that Assad wasn't driving most of his population away, or that Assad wasn't using chemical weapons. Where we had to counter was people who then concluded what should be done."

– Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, Chair of the Middle East Program at the Wilson Center and former Secretary's Special Representative for Syria Engagement and the Special Envoy to the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS.

"The impact of disinformation is apparent when they [policymakers] say, of course we know the White Helmets are first responders and humanitarians, but if we're to invite them to speak, it will be used to manipulate the truth. So it has undermined states' confidence to do the right thing. It has weakened the resolve of supposed champions of human rights defenders and humanitarians in Syria to stand up for them in international fora."

– International advocate working with civil society and the UN.

OUR PROBLEM IS NOT THAT ASSAD LIES PUBLICLY, BUT IT IS THAT THE WORLD DOES ITS BEST TO BELIEVE HIM.

THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION-FROM KAFRANBE

Deadly Disinformation: how online conspiracies about Syria cause real world harm.

Picture credit: Raed Fares, Union of Revolutionary Bureaus (URB), Kafranbel

3. ERASING HISTORY AND DENYING WAR CRIMES

"I worry about the erasure of memory and our history slowly eroding. With the sheer exhaustion and trauma it's easier to turn away than continue to educate the world. In that silence, and with the addition of the propaganda machine, we are losing the truth of what actually happened in Syria and we risk the archive of evidence being tainted and history being revised. I don't want my children to say, 'What really happened in Syria?' That's the dark side of where we are."

– Lina Sergie Attar, founder and CEO of Karam Foundation, Syrian-American architect, writer and The Syria Campaign board chairperson

Preservation of history and memory is at stake when confusion and doubt take over and war crimes are denied all together. This denial has a painful impact on survivors.

The six most retweeted and shared posts on Twitter between 2015 and 2021 all claim the Douma chemical attack was faked or that the international investigation into the attack was compromised.

We have spoken to humanitarians and human rights defenders who are too afraid to speak out about the devastating impact disinformation has had on their lives – who are scared their families will be detained, intimidated or tortured as a result. Many fear for their own lives.

For those who have lost their loved ones or been forced to flee their life and homes, the denial of war crimes creates devastating real-world harm.

Mahmoud Bwedany was a student in Douma when the chemical bomb was dropped. He noted that the attack came one week after Assad's forces started targeting the town's internet, shortly after international media left the area following an intensification of bombardment.

"In that week everything changed. There was less coverage of the siege and less ability to share the evidence with the outside world, combined with heavy shelling. It became a perfect environment for disinformation," he said.

"The regime started the disinformation campaign around the Douma attack by intimidating witnesses and threatening doctors and their families. Russia started using anyone under regime control in

Picture credit: Anas El-Dyab

Douma to deny the attack took place. They forced witnesses who were traumatised to say there was no such thing as an attack on Douma.

"On an emotional level it was a very hard thing to see. It was some other kind of pain we were not used to. The truth is being altered and the criminal is getting away with it.

"I was surprised to see western academics speaking about the chemical attack and analysing it in such a naive way. When supposedly credible people say that the attack didn't happen, people change their minds, especially when witnesses are too afraid to speak. The story is being pulled out from our heads and altered into something that did not happen. It is impossible to erase the memories we have in our heads."

–Mahmoud Bwedany, Action for Sama

Lubna Alkanawati is a feminist Syrian activist and human rights defender and Deputy Executive Director at Women Now for Development.

"Denial itself has put me in a vulnerable position because I feel I need to fight all the time to prove that I really suffered. Whether it›s the siege, or the bombardment or the chemical attack or from being wanted from the security branch, all these crimes are denied by the regime and its allies. It's psychologically devastating to keep having to prove you've been hurt.

"Disinformation gives protection to the Assad regime, and it gives him impunity. If we don't keep the truth about the crimes against humanity, we won't be able to hold the regime and those who commit these violations accountable."

"In 2017, the regime targeted the town of Khan Sheikhoun with sarin gas, and of course we were the first to arrive on the site. Some of my colleagues suffered from suffocation during the rescue operations. We became witnesses. The Syrian and Russian regimes continued their propaganda, suggesting that we, the White Helmets, either committed these crimes or faked the scene. After that, they attacked our centre with 12 air raids to kill the witnesses, so they could continue their disinformation campaign."

– Hamid Kutini, White Helmets volunteer, Northwest Syria
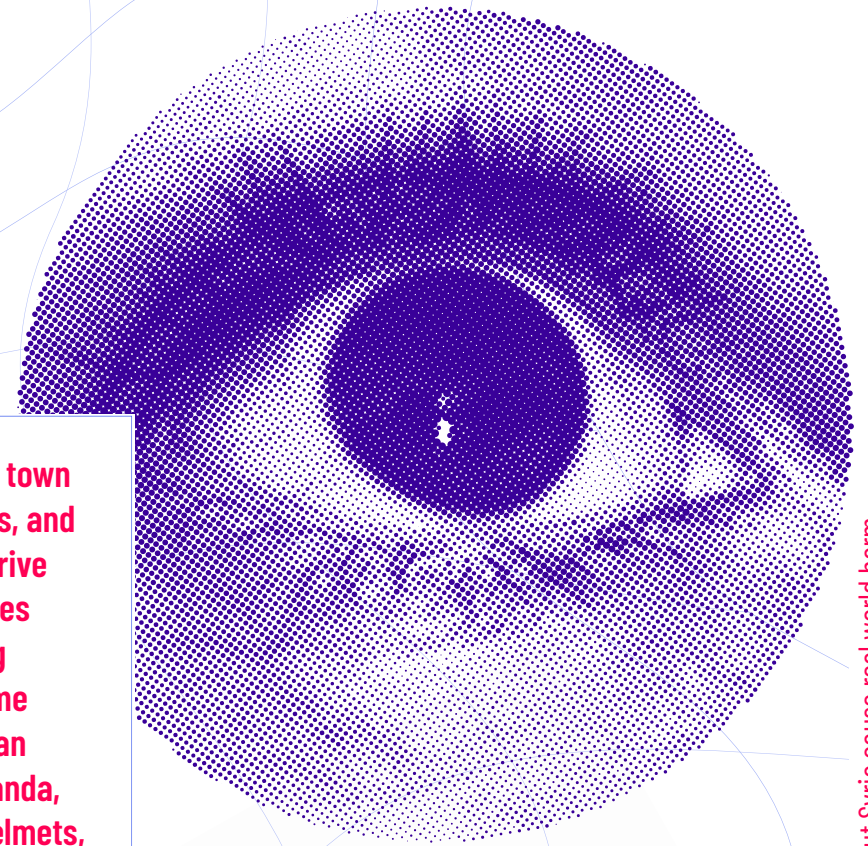
4. ONLINE HATE – ADDING INSULT TO INJURY

Humanitarians, journalists, human rights defenders, victims of chemical weapons attacks, and survivors of war crimes often described the disinformation as salt in the wounds. To so many, it constitutes heartless mocking of all they have endured, a denial of the very facts that have devastated lives.

The harassment is so persistent that almost everyone interviewed for this report said they see it as something they have learnt to live with. Most view it as a cost of speaking the truth. It is a failure of governments and social media platforms that hate-filled lies and conspiracy theories are so much part of human rights or documentation work, that survivors of torture, chemical attacks or other war crimes, must face a barrage of criticism and hate for telling their stories.

Even for those who are too afraid to speak out publicly in fear of the backlash from trolls, consuming the hate and denial of war crimes as users of social media can be extremely distressing. Syrians anonymously described how the fear of telling their story, the self-censorship they endure to avoid putting themselves or their families at risk has a huge impact on their mental health.

"There have been attacks on me and on my family on top of the psychological trauma of what we've been through. I am a community leader here in Chicago. The disinformation campaign tried to undermine my reputation and community standing, and ruin my community relationships."

– Dr Zaher Sahloul, President of MedGlobal and former President of the Syrian American Medical Society

"Disinformation and misinformation hurt me personally and damaged my reputation... I was debunking their stories every day on social media. Even my Facebook account, which has tens of thousands of followers, got hacked in order to erase this archived history."

– Mahmoud Raslan, Photographer

5. LEGITIMISING GOVERNMENTS' ANTI-REFUGEE POLICIES

Anti-refugee or asylum policies have benefited from disinformation, with some governments borrowing Assad and Russia's claims that Syria is now safe and refugees can go home, despite stark evidence to the contrary.

"It could even lead to people doubting their own policies… Sometimes not much is happening on a certain file and it's clear that that won't change very soon. But then, when there's actors saying, for example, 'refugees can return', then a lot of people will think that really is the case. Especially movements that are sharp on refugees could make use of this. They'll use it as an instrument to gain attention. It's an increasing concern, in many different countries."

– A Dutch government official

Denmark's revoking of Syrian refugees' citizenship has been shocking to so many, not just because it puts lives at risk but also because it signals a normalisation with the Syrian regime that many fear might be adopted by other States. This was also articulated by Ambassador James F. Jeffrey in relation to the suspension of chemical weapons briefings at the UN Security Council.

"It's not of particular importance whether the UNSC hears the OPCW's latest list of Assad chemical weapons violations once every month or once every two months, or whether it hears an IIIM report on Syrian government atrocities every month or every two months. What is of dramatic importance is; when everyone learns that the US is pushing for less focus on Syria… [T]his will be used in various ways by social media and by the Russians, Iranians,

and Syrians, to show that the US is changing its position and warming to Assad. Don't be the last on the train, is the message that they keep putting out."

– Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, Chair of the Middle East Program at the Wilson Center and former Secretary's Special Representative for Syria Engagement and the Special Envoy to the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS

Similarly, some policymakers were concerned the new UN Development plan, currently in draft form, moves toward normalisation by using the veil of neutrality to whitewash regime crimes and push for recovery funding. One of Russia's and Syria's favourite disinformation lines, Syria as a safe country ready to be rebuilt, is soon to be adopted by the United Nations in Syria, insiders say.

> **"One narrative is that refugees can't go back because the West won't rebuild Syria. There have been different conferences organised by Russia… They always have the ministry of defense come and say we have all these plans and everything is going to work fantastically, all the refugees will be able to come back."**
>
> – European Policymaker

Picture credit: Simon Skipper

6. DIVERTING VALUABLE RESOURCES

Most policymakers we interviewed said that they can recognise Russian talking points when they see them but they have to work harder to explain the truth to the public. Almost everyone said they were confronted with conspiracy theories in meetings or "town hall" events and had to address disinformation before even talking about policy solutions.

"The fact that our allies… were hesitant didn't prevent us from acting, but it made it more complex because we had to then explain it to them."

– Schams El Ghoneimi, Foreign Policy Advisor for Renew Europe (speaking in personal capacity)

"I'd have people write to me about Syria and they would have basic details about the conflict wrong. If you're arguing about the facts, you're never on an easy road. If you're having to say to someone, I'm sorry, you've got this wrong… it makes things really hard. It's particularly hard if there is a conspiracy theory involved – then they're not looking for evidence, they're looking for confirmation."

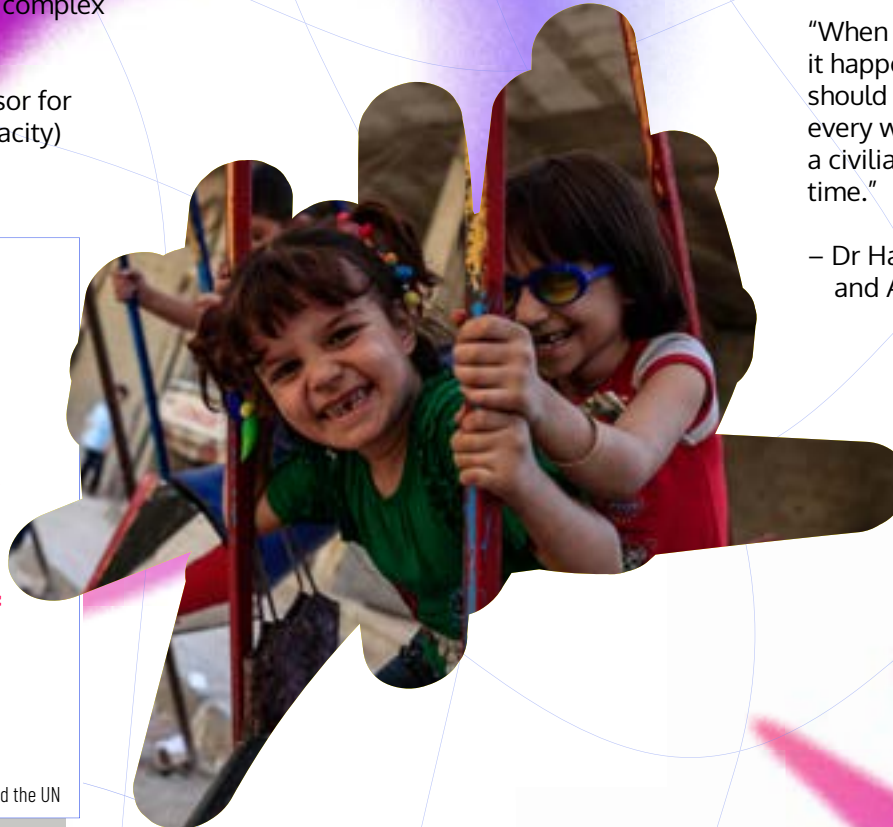– Alison McGovern, Labour MP and former co-chair of Friends of Syria All-Party Parliamentary Group

Humanitarians are also forced to expend valuable energy addressing conspiracies spread about them.

"Some members of the UNSC have soft positions and they believe some of the Russian and Syrian agenda. We have to go over and over the facts and prove to them that this is fake."

– Dr Basel Termanini, Chairman SAMS Foundation

"When a hospital was attacked you had to prove it happened and that it was not a fake attack. It should be the international community's job after every war crime to prove this hospital exists, it was a civilian neighbourhood. But we had to do it every time."

– Dr Hamza Kateab, Doctor, human rights activist and Action for Sama

"You know some UN member states, such as representatives from India, don't necessarily believe it, but they use it as a way to obfuscate from actually talking about ground truths. You end up having to establish essential basic truths as a basis for conversation which takes up 90% of your energy, then you have 10% of the time left to actually talk about what matters."

– International advocate working with civil society and the UN

Picture credit: Sameer Al Doumy

Deadly Disinformation: how online conspiracies about Syria cause real world harm.

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7. HAMPERING HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

No one knows how much more critical funding humanitarian organisations would have raised had they not been victims of concerted disinformation campaigns for more than seven years. However, it is clear that the conspiracists consistently attempt to undermine those who fund and support frontline humanitarians.

When we spoke to both frontline medical and humanitarian organisations, they felt the accusations had affected their donations – and as a consequence the number of lives they could save.

"The fake claims about funding going directly to the fighting groups affected funding of the hospitals. So much funding from NGOs, governments or institutions has been delayed or stopped because of this. If a hospital doesn't have funding, there is no hospital. You can't pay for medication, equipment, salaries, fuel."

– Dr Hamza, Doctor, human rights activist and Action for Sama

"Some governments, like the UK, have the resources to defend their actions. When I look to smaller governments, they're maybe not prepared to get in trouble with Russia or explain the White Helmets to the public. So the easiest thing is to give the money to the UN and not meet the needs on the ground. Many Syrian organisations don't have enough funding. We hear about billions of dollars for aid at conferences on Syria but most of that funding goes to the UN."

– Farouq Habib, White Helmets Deputy Manager

"There are very deliberate claims of UN humanitarian resources falling into the hands of terrorist groups, despite the UN reporting in detail on how funds are disbursed. There's zero evidence to support that claim, but they continue to make it. And it's something other countries like to parrot in the absence of evidence."

– International advocate working with civil society and the UN

"Any funders doing research on SAMS or others will find these articles and if you want to play it safe, and many do, they might decide not to fund these organisations because of these claims."

– Dr Zaher Sahloul, President of MedGlobal and former President of the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS)

"It might have reduced our potential donations. It's hard to measure what we might have raised. Accusations of terrorism might sway people against helping. Even if they are impressed with what we do and think we are doing good work, they have some doubt and so do not give."

– Dr Basel Termanini, Chairman SAMS Foundation

Picture credit: Abdullah Hammam

8. MAKING A MOCKERY OF INTERNATIONAL LAW AND INSTITUTIONS

The ripples of disinformation on Syria reach far and wide, threatening the very institutions and international laws that are meant to keep our world safe. When hospitals are bombed without consequence and humanitarians are called "legitimate targets" for attack with impunity, the credibility of our global systems are thrown into flux.

The UN system and international courts have failed Syria time and again and disinformation has played its disastrous part. The impact on our values, principles and democracy are immeasurable.

"We've seen disinformation about elections in many countries, and they try to distract and undermine the credibility of democratic institutions. They know they can't say Putin and Assad are good guys, but they want to make the public feel there are no good guys, that all governments lie, that all those who speak about human rights and accountability aren't honest and are just politicised and a pretext for intervention and regime change. So, they make the public distrust their institutions and make the public paralysed. Then, governments can't persuade their people or rally them to action."

"Western Governments rely only on the democratic system itself to correct disinformation over time. But a lot of people who had interest in human causes are stepping away because they just don't know the truth."

– Farouq Habib, White Helmets Deputy Manager

Deadly Disinformation: how online conspiracies about Syria cause real world harm.

Picture credit: UNSC   22

9. PAVING THE WAY FOR UKRAINE

Ambassador James Jeffrey, a senior American diplomat, said that during his time as U.S. special representative for Syria, he foresaw the importance of preventing a Russian win in Syria because he argued their role supporting Assad was about creating "a 19th century great powers condominium". A win there would only mean an emboldened, unhindered Putin elsewhere.

Almost everyone agreed that international inaction on Syria, enabled in part by the Russian-led disinformation campaign, has made the Ukraine invasion possible.

"Again and again Putin has tested the limits of action and found that there seemingly are no limits, which takes us directly to where we are in Ukraine now."

– Reza Afshar OBE, Executive Director of Independent Diplomat, a non-profit diplomatic advisory group, and former Syria lead at the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office

And of course, Russia is using many of the same disinformation tactics in Ukraine as we have seen in Syria. Some of the accounts investigated for this report are now spreading lies about war crimes being committed in Ukraine. Even finding ways to attack the White Helmets at the same time or recycling the confusion already created and deploying it to their new frontline.

"The Russians linked us to Ukraine from the beginning. When they accuse the Ukrainians of prepping for chemical provocations, they used the White Helmets as a description of that. When we made a statement of solidarity with Ukraine, they immediately said we will send terrorists to Ukraine. The Russians are busy with Ukraine, but they didn't forget about us and will link us in any way."
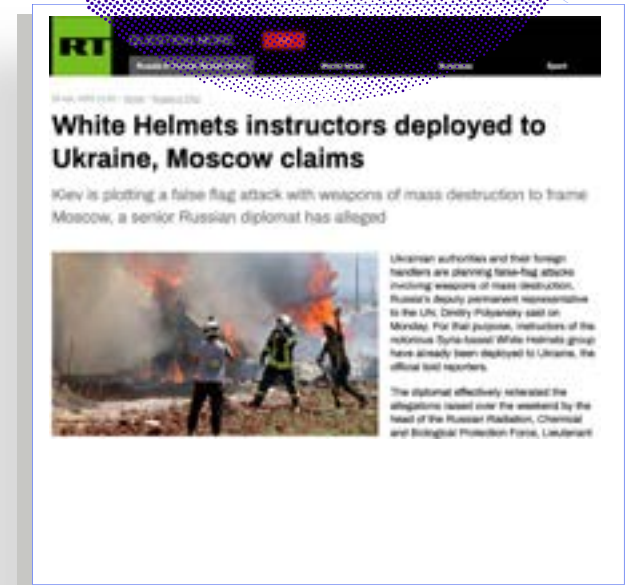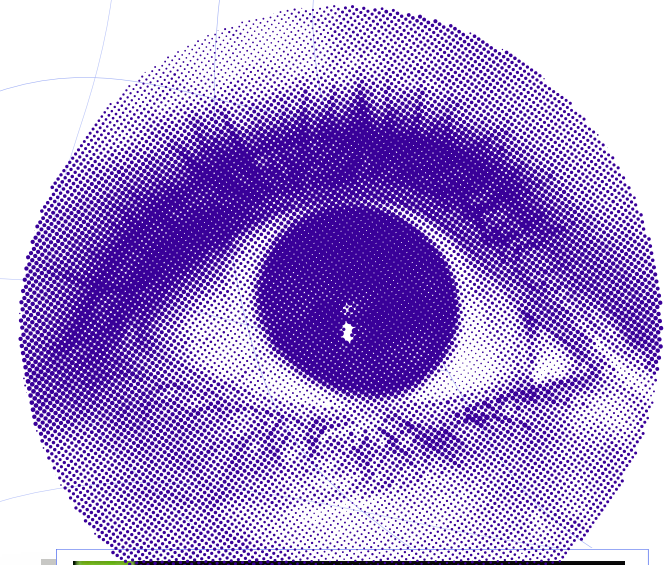
– Farouq Habib, White Helmets Deputy Manager

"Syria is a testing ground for this type of disinformation activity and the lessons learned from this case can inform action on Ukraine and beyond."

– Former official at the US Department of State

"The heroes of today are the enemies of tomorrow. Russia is playing a little of the same game in Ukraine. Western media are on the ground now but when the cameras turn away an people lose interest then Russia can cast doubt and that's when people will say, what's really happening in Ukraine?"

– Lina Sergie Attar, founder and CEO of Karam Foundation, Syrian-American architect, writer and The Syria Campaign Board Chairperson

White Helmets instructors deployed to Ukraine, Moscow claims

Kiev is plotting a false flag attack with weapons of mass destruction to frame Moscow, a senior Russian diplomat has alleged

Deadly Disinformation: how online conspiracies about Syria cause real world harm.

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10. UNDETERRED BY DISINFORMATION

For all the real-world harm and hurt disinformation has caused, it was clear from interviews with humanitarians and human rights defenders that it has made them even more determined to save lives, expose war crimes and tell the truth. Despite the devastating psychological impacts, most still see it as proof their work is having an impact. However they need the unwavering support of international governments and policymakers.

"Disinformation made me more willing to resist and to continue my work to deliver the truth. It's exhausting and painful but it keeps me working all the time to keep my story and the stories of other women, men and families alive. I need to keep saying the truth because those responsible must be held accountable."

– Lubna Alkanawati, Deputy Executive Director at Women Now for Development.

"It caused some frustration and depression to many of us in the beginning. Imagine especially someone who puts their lives at risk to save others, and they go home and find people claiming they fabricated photos, they don't exist or are ISIS or CIA. But over time, it gave them more determination. They realised it's proof of how important their work is and now nobody cares what these bad actors will say."

– Farouq Habib, White Helmets Deputy Manager

"It hasn't stopped me from speaking out. I am very stubborn. What happened in Syria is much bigger than all of us and I can't stop at this point. Some had to stop because they had a mental breakdown or burnout but for some of us it has become a life struggle."

– Dr Zaher Sahloul, President of MedGlobal and former President of the Syrian American Medical Society

Picture credit: Action for Sama

RECOMMENDATIONS
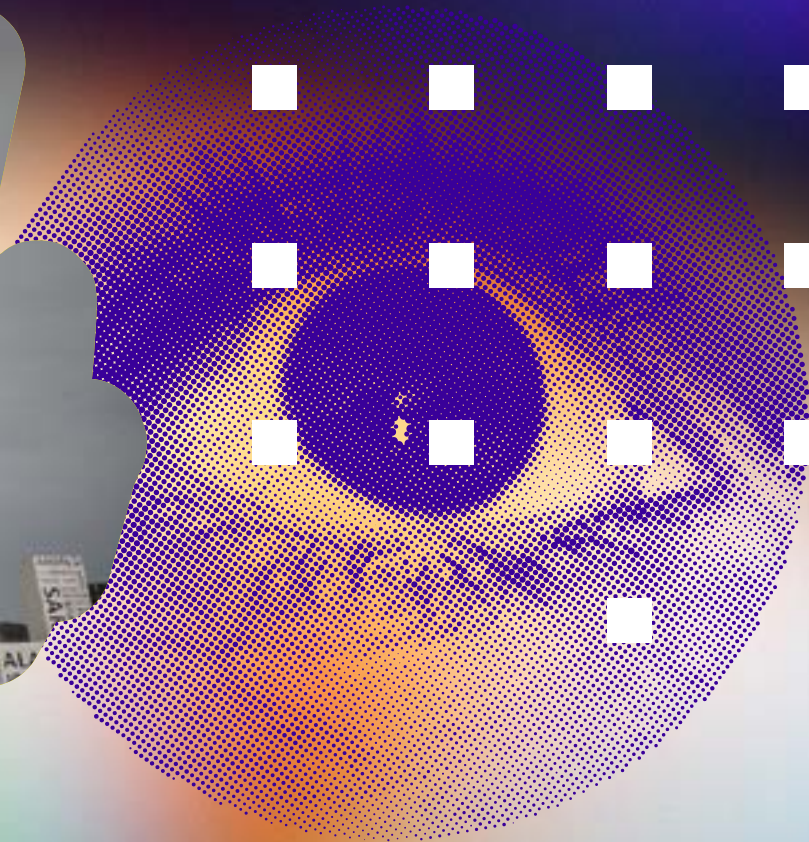
Picture credit: White Helmets

FOR GOVERNMENTS AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS RESPONSIBLE FOR SYRIA POLICY

- The information space around the Syria conflict has been manipulated by both state and non-state actors since the earliest days of the revolution. It is within this murky environment that malign actors attempt to sway policymakers as well as public opinion, from whitewashing the war crimes of the Assad regime to smearing the humanitarian and human rights workers on the ground. To that end, policymakers must ensure that they are relying on information directly from trustworthy sources, recognising that disinformation does not exist exclusively on social media (multiple actors in our dataset also have blogs, "news" websites, and other platforms to spread misleading content, which also makes its way into mainstream media). It is also crucial for those targeted by disinformation to have direct access to policymakers, so that government officials can hear directly from those who are most impacted by disinformation and online harassment.

- Promote and fund digital citizenship and literacy education that teaches citizens, beginning at a young age, to think critically about online content and identify untrue information. Start with school-level programming aimed at teaching youth how to safely navigate online spaces, check information, and identify trustworthy sources.

- Policymakers working on Syria should adopt a whole-of-government approach in tackling disinformation, linking it to other government efforts to counter disinformation on other topics such as COVID and Ukraine, as well as providing offline support to humanitarian and human rights workers working in/on Syria.

- Policymakers should devote greater resources to supporting locally-led efforts to document instances of disinformation and violations of human rights in Syria. Syrian community members are the best messengers to the Syrian people, and their efforts to record the truth about crimes in violation of international law constitute an immense asset for policymakers who are in charge of countering disinformation as well as putting in place accountability mechanisms around the world. Furthermore, policymakers should earmark resources to ensure the safety and protection of documenters on the ground.

FOR DIGITAL POLICY AND PLATFORM REGULATORS

- Platform regulation should be systemic, and require online platforms to demonstrate that their policies, processes and systems are designed and implemented in a way that protects human rights and mitigates the risks posed by a range of illegal, and in some cases legal but harmful, activity, such as disinformation, abuse and harassment. Platforms should be required to make policy, product and design changes that would slow down the spread of disinformation. New legislation designed to rein in technology harms should further ensure that loopholes or special privileges are not created for "media" which would only exacerbate the spread of disinformation. This type of approach would not only provide oversight to ensure that platforms consistently enforce their Community Standards or Guidelines through effective content moderation, but also limit the amplification and proliferation of harmful content, activities and behavior through engagement-driven algorithmic recommendation systems.

- This report primarily focuses on disinformation, harassment and abuse on Twitter because the platform offers far greater levels of transparency and data access than other major social media platforms. Platform regulation should therefore require significant additional transparency and data access to both regulators and approved third-party researchers (e.g. from academia or civil society). This would enable a more comprehensive understanding of how disinformation, harassment and abuse proliferate online, the impact of platforms' recommendation, curation and moderation systems, and the effectiveness of platforms' responses to these threats to humanitarian and human rights workers.

FOR SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

- It is imperative that social media platforms consistently and effectively enforce their existing policies on disinformation, hate speech, online harassment and abuse across linguistic and geographic contexts, and address disparities in enforcement, resourcing, and specific contextual expertise between them. Our research has shown that online abuse and harassment stemming from disinformation campaigns has directly impacted the lives of humanitarians, human rights workers and journalists covering the Syria conflict. At times, platforms have demonstrated their willingness to employ additional resources to address

certain thematic harms such as public health disinformation or foreign interference in elections. Given the seriousness of the impacts outlined in this report, platforms should commit to applying similar levels of resourcing to protect humanitarian workers and human rights defenders in the context of the ongoing Syrian conflict.

- This should include:
  - Taking action at the account level against serial violators of platforms' policies. It is not enough to continuously take down harmful content – in repetitive cases accounts should have their content excluded from algorithmic recommendations, and if they persist be permanently banned from the platform.

  - Platforms also have previously employed specific protection strategies for electoral officials and candidates, which allows them to further secure these accounts. These features should also be made available to offer greater protection to NGOs, humanitarians, and human rights defenders that are directly targeted by online disinformation, harassment and abuse.

- Social media companies should provide greater transparency and data access to academic and civil society researchers to investigate online harms such as disinformation, harassment and abuse on their platforms. This report focuses on Twitter as it provides more access to data than most major platforms, however many of the key disinformation actors identified in this report also operate across other major platforms where there is limited scope for researchers to monitor their activity and assess their impact. While forthcoming digital regulation should force platforms to be more transparent, in the short to medium term the platforms themselves should take the initiative and share more data with researchers.

FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

- Testimonies in this report clearly demonstrate that disinformation campaigns have a real impact on the lives of victims of disinformation. Advocates for addressing online abuse and harassment of humanitarian and human rights workers should invoke these examples, among others, in their conversations with policymakers, underscoring the link between online disinformation and offline harm as a means of prioritising counter-disinformation efforts.

- As governments worldwide debate social media platform regulation and digital policy more broadly, civil society organisations are key to helping make the case for a systems-based approach to regulation, rather than focusing on specific examples of harmful online content. This means addressing the engagement-driven algorithms that make it possible for disinformation to rapidly spread online, as well as allocating more resources to consistently address disinformation in languages other than English.

- There is an ever-growing number of organisations advocating for protection against online harms like disinformation, abuse, and harassment targeting minorities, activists, election workers and others. Civil society organisations concerned with protecting Syria's humanitarian and human rights workers should aim to partner with like-minded organisations and add their voice to existing advocacy and protection campaigns.