



EXAMINING THE WHITE HELMETS IN SYRIA

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



"The US, UK and France have launched more than 100 missiles against what they say were Syrian chemical weapons facilities in response to a chemical weapons attack in Damascus suburb (Eastern Ghouta)."¹ This was the headline of an article that appeared in the international edition of *The Guardian* on April 13, 2018. The massive missile attack by the US and its European allies was carried out following ground intelligence reports provided by a "humanitarian" group known as "The White Helmets" (TWH).

Following the provision of intelligence reports by TWH, there have been many questions surrounding the organization. Who are The White Helmets? Who do they work for? Who is funding this organization? What do other humanitarian groups and independent media outlets say about The White Helmets?

The White Helmets appeared on the Syrian crisis scene in October 2014 after the Civil War in Syria erupted in March 2011.² The organization is headed by Raed Al Saleh, a Syrian national from Idlib.

¹ Julian Borger and Peter Beaumont, "Syria: US, UK and France launch Strikes in response to Chemical Attack," *The Guardian*, April 14, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/14/syria-air-strikes-us-uk-and-france-launch-attack-on-assad-regime>

² Brynn Holland, "Who Are the White Helmets?," *History*, April 09, 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/who-are-the-white-helmets>

Raed has remained the head of the organization since the organization was formed back in 2014.³ Before joining The White Helmets, Raed was a businessman who dealt in electronics.

Western sources give a very positive and optimistic image about TWH playing an extremely constructive role in aid and rescue in the Syrian crisis. The organization claims to have saved more than a 100,000 lives so far in the Syrian crisis,⁴ and has been hailed as a messiah for the innocent Syrian civilians. Comprising of volunteers, members of TWH come from diverse professions like medicine, engineering, education and construction.⁵

However, after a thorough research into TWH work in Syria based on the interviews, articles and statements given by other humanitarian groups in Syria such as the REAL Syrian Civil Defense and independent journalists, who carried out investigative missions in Syria, it was discovered that there is more to TWH than meets the eye.

The most important fact about The White Helmets organization is that it is *not* a part or wing of the Syrian Civil Defense group, contrary to the former's claim.⁶ TWH has stolen the name from the legitimate Syrian organization of the same name. The REAL Syrian Civil Defense group was formed back in 1953 as opposed to TWH that was formed in the second decade of the 21st century. The REAL Syrian Civil Defense group which was founded, organized, funded, operated (till date) and manned by local Syrians is also a founding member of the International Civil Defense Organization (ICDO). The White Helmets organization is neither a member of ICDO, nor is it recognized as a Civil Defense work group by the international body.⁷

Furthermore, unlike the REAL Syrian Civil Defense group created by Syrians, TWH was created in 2013 with help of UK and US funding in Turkey by James Le Mesurier, a former British soldier and a private contractor whose company is based in Dubai.⁸ The members and volunteers of TWH are said to be Syrian civilians of the rebel-held areas who were sent to Turkey for some rescue operations training.

³ "The Most Dangerous Place in the World," White Helmets, accessed on May 26, 2018, <https://www.whitehelmets.org/en>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Brynn Holland, "Who Are the White Helmets?," *History*, April 09, 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/who-are-the-white-helmets>

⁶ "Retract the Award Given to NATO's White Helmets," Petition, Change.org, accessed on May 21, 2018, <https://www.change.org/p/ole-von-uexkull-retract-the-award-given-to-the-nato-white-helmets>

⁷ "White Helmets' black record: 'Real Syrian Civil Defence groups describe them as terrorists'," Youtube.com, accessed on May 21, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijXYoBTHues>

⁸ Rick Sterling, "Seven Steps of Highly Effective Manipulators," *Dissident Voice*, April 09, 2015, <https://dissidentvoice.org/2015/04/seven-steps-of-highly-effective-manipulators/>

According to Vanessa Beeley, an independent journalist and researcher who recently went on several fact-finding missions to Syria, TWH is actually a group of terrorists posing as a humanitarian organization. During her fact-finding mission to Syria in 2016, Vanessa observed that the activities of TWH are very difficult to witness by independent observers and journalists because they are highly embedded in areas held by rebel groups like Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda and ISIS (Daesh). She also stated that after interviewing members of the REAL Syrian Civil Defense group in West Aleppo (who escaped East Aleppo when the terrorists invaded the city in 2012), it was revealed that the terrorists killed the members of the REAL Syrian Civil Defense group and stole their equipment, uniforms and ambulances. The terrorists then started posing as rescue and humanitarian workers and drove the surviving members of the REAL Syrian Civil Defense group to West Aleppo.⁹

In her interview, Ms. Beeley further stated that members of the REAL Syria Civil Defense group and Aleppo Medical Association (AMA) representatives in West Aleppo claimed that TWH in East Aleppo embedded with the rebel groups do not carry out humanitarian activities, but rather move around the city with latest firearms terrorizing the local population and pick up the bodies of civilians eliminated by the terrorists in order to wipe out any evidence of the atrocities committed by the anti-government rebels against the civilians and to stop the international community from finding out the truth about the situation on ground.¹⁰ The testimonies given to Ms. Beeley by members of the REAL Syrian Civil Defense group and AMA were further corroborated by interviews with units of the REAL Syrian Civil Defense group stationed in Tartus, Latakia and their headquarters in Damascus.

The White Helmets are also known to be media savvy. They run active social media accounts on Twitter and Facebook. However, the organization is accused by many independent journalists and media outlets for propagating anti-government propaganda in Syria and creating fake news to instigate foreign intervention in Syria. The White Helmets are also blamed for recycling photographs of incidents and victims that date back to several years ago.¹¹

In addition to all the information stated before, facts regarding the funding of The White Helmets also raise suspicions about the real motives of the organization. The White Helmets is a non-governmental, multi-million dollar organization. Most of its funding comes from NATO, EU and GCC

⁹ "White Helmets' black record: 'Real Syrian Civil Defence groups describe them as terrorists'," Youtube.com, accessed on May 21, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijXYoBTHues>

¹⁰ "White Helmets' black record: 'Real Syrian Civil Defence groups describe them as terrorists'," Youtube.com, accessed on May 21, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijXYoBTHues>

¹¹ Shawn Helton, "Rescue Redux: Are Syria's White Helmets 'Recycling' its Child Victims," *21st Century Wire*, October 18, 2016, <http://21stcenturywire.com/2016/10/18/crisis-extras-are-syrias-white-helmets-recycling-their-barrel-bomb-victims/>

member states¹² and all these states have been very open about their intentions regarding the regime change in Syria.

Government Entity	Country	Year(s)	Dollar Amount
US AID (via US State Dept.)	US	2014-2015	\$23 million
British Foreign Office	UK	2014-2015	\$24 million
EU	EU	2015	\$4.5 million
Netherlands	Netherlands	2016	\$4.5 million
British Foreign Office (round 2)	UK	2016	\$32 million
British Foreign Office (round 3)	UK	2016-2017	\$24 million
German gov't	Germany	2016	\$7.6 million
Danish gov't	Denmark	2016	(undisclosed sum)
Qatari source (seed funding)	Qatar	2014	(undisclosed sum)
Japan	Japan	2015	(undisclosed sum)
DG-ECHO	EU	2015-2016	(undisclosed sum)
Crowd funding campaigns		2014-2016	(undisclosed sum)
Website donations		2014-2016	(undisclosed sum)
Jo Cox Fund	UK	2016	\$2.4 million
		EST. TOTAL:	\$123 million +++

NOTE: Much of the White Helmets incoming finances are funneled through a Netherlands registered NGO vehicle called **Mayday Rescue**. Additional funding rounds from EU member states, including the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Luxemburg, Ireland, Spain and others, may also be concealed behind the generic heading of "Emergency Health and Relief Support to the Population Affected by the Crisis in Syria", with money distributed through the **Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG-ECHO)**, formerly known as the European Community Humanitarian Aid Office.

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Conclusion

Are The White Helmets messiahs or a hoax? The evidence and proofs are all there for any rational individual to make a logical decision. This is the right time to make a correct judgment about the motives of organizations who are working in this conflict to determine whether those organizations are trying to solve the problem or are a part of the problem because uncovering falsehood years later never do any good. Perceptions about TWH in the international mainstream media are very positive, but the allegations leveled against the organization by independent media outlets and journalists prove otherwise. The controversies that surround TWH combined with compelling proof and evidences provided by independent journalists and media outlets unveil the farce that the organization is trying to sell to the international community. TWH's despicable strategy of inciting

¹² "Our Partners," Syria Civil Defence, accessed on May 21, 2018, <http://syriacivildefense.org/our-partners>

¹³ Shawn Helton, "Rescue Redux: Are Syria's White Helmets 'Recycling' its Child Victims," *21st Century Wire*, October 18, 2016, <http://21stcenturywire.com/2016/10/18/crisis-extras-are-syrias-white-helmets-recycling-their-barrel-bomb-victims/>

foreign intervention into Syria by recycling old images and orchestrating false attacks has been proven by various journalists who took fact-finding missions to Syria during the ongoing conflict time and again. TWH is also known to hamper the proceedings of other international organizations such as Organization for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) who try to carry fact-finding missions in the conflict zone. The organization is also blamed by the Syrian government and countries like Russia for protecting the rebels by requesting no-fly zones over their held areas. Furthermore, the most revealing fact about the motives of TWH is the undisclosed funding it receives from the US, the EU and GCC member states who have been openly vocal about the regime change in Syria. Prior cases of such manipulations and hoaxes (case and point the Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction case) resulted in an enormous loss of human lives and resources. The uncritical media promotion of TWH should be avoided and the organization should be seriously investigated to avoid further loss of human lives and deterioration of the situation.