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THE WHITE HELMETS: FACT-CHECKING

**BY EYEWITNESSES
AND FORMER
VOLUNTEERS**



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PART I

THE WHITE HELMETS: NEITHER NEUTRAL NOR VOLUNTEERS

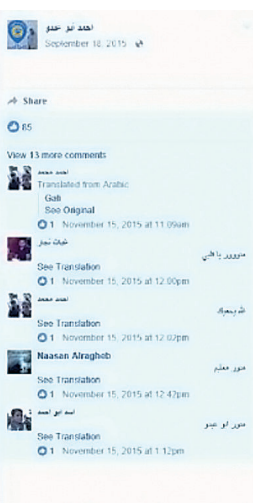
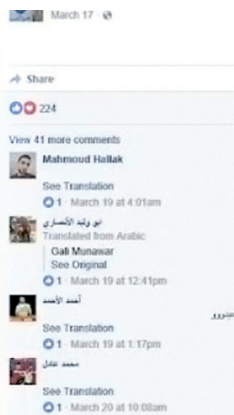
The Oscar-winning film *The White Helmets* begins with the following words: *“In areas out of regime control, those who remain rely on a group of volunteers dedicated to saving anyone in need.”* Fact-checking based on more than 100 interviews showed that the White Helmets were by no means a “group of volunteers.”

The Foundation for the Study of Democracy interviewed more than 40 White Helmets, 20 former members of armed groups, as well as residents from areas where the organisation used to operate. Most of the White Helmets were neither volunteers nor activists working without compensation, but permanent employees entitled to monthly pay, as well as regular rations of humanitarian aid, including food.

Witnesses shared their personal experience, indicating that in a number of cases instead of volunteering they were forced to join the organisation as an alternative to being imprisoned by armed groups or being sent into combat. Former employees of the White Helmets also said that most of the few activists who worked for free left after they had been forced to take part in staged shooting sessions.

The White Helmets centres were completely at odds with the decision-making approaches and the setting up of NGOs, instead creating a para-military structure with group commanders and

heads of district, city and regional branches with a developed system of secrecy and security and a strict hierarchy that covered all employees. Most of the commanders of the White Helmets centres and the majority of their employees kept their true identities secret and went by their nicknames or call signs. Former members told us that commanders would often threaten them with weapons and even promised to kill those who refused to execute the tasks they were assigned, such as going to the frontline to evacuate fighters. Witness accounts mention the fact that the White Helmets underwent combat training supervised by al-Nusra, a terrorist group. Employees of the White Helmets communicated with armed groups or terrorist organisations that protected them, using coded messages, which is also something more commonly seen among military units. It was not uncommon for the White Helmets centres to be outfitted like military facilities or buildings occupied by terrorists in order to prepare their defence: openings were created in partition walls in order to enable people to move around without being noticed, and tunnels linked these centres to the quarters of illegal armed groups. Former members of the White Helmets said that whenever they failed to execute orders or diverged from the ideological or religious preferences of the unit's leaders they could be handed over to a sharia court to face severe punishment up to the death penalty, arrested, imprisoned or fined. One of the victims said that he was thrown into jail for refusing to work with the White Helmets, and was beaten there in the presence of the centre's head. Another employee of the White Helmets left on a mission without orders from the command to rescue civilians, including his own father,



A significant part of the White Helmets made no secret of their affiliation with or sympathy toward terrorist or illegal armed groups, openly admired suicide bombers, and supported the killing and torture of Syrian soldiers. Above is a screenshot of Ahmed Abu Abdo, a White Helmets employee who openly posted on Facebook photos of himself holding weapons.

after a shelling incident. The centre's command threatened him with physical punishment for leaving without direct orders, and later slapped him with a big fine.

Former employees of the White Helmets said that quite a few people working at their centres continued to fight for various illegal armed groups or terrorist organisations. For the majority of other White Helmets, working for the organisation had nothing to do with serving their communities: it was the only way they could avoid starvation for themselves and their families. In addition to this, working for the organisation offered a certain level of protection by armed groups that defended the White Helmets. Terrorist and armed groups would usually let cars and people with the White Helmets passes through without stopping or checking them. In most cases, the same armed groups ran background checks on new members. For example, one witness said that he tried to get a job at one of the branches of the White Helmets but was told that he needed a reference from the sharia council of Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate. Through this procedure, employees of the White Helmets were granted the status of trusted agents that ensured additional protection from other fighters.

According to witness accounts, the White Helmets benefited from lavish funding amid an otherwise dire economic situation in Syria, and just a few illegal armed groups and terrorist organisations received more. Witnesses also claimed that the organisation had deep pockets and could afford to pay high salaries to its members in cash. In a number of cases, these sums were comparable or even greater than what armed fighters received for combat engagement.