



Meeting Syria's volunteer rescuers

CRJ has been documenting the difficult and inevitably harrowing work of the Syrian Civil Defence force volunteers over the last three issues. **Emily Hough** travelled to their training ground to meet some of them for herself

March 2011: Hopes of peaceful change in Syria were fanned by the optimism of the Arab Spring blowing through the Middle East. But peaceful protest – triggered by the kidnapping, mutilation and murder of schoolboys who had written anti-regime comments on a blackboard – drew swift and brutal retribution from the country's ruler. This ferocious response evolved into large-scale atrocities through 2012.

When Aleppo and other areas were liberated by opposition forces, the regime retreated before mercilessly deploying airstrikes, artillery and helicopters, treating anyone in the liberated areas as a combatant.

Governance and communities collapsed under the onslaught, says James Le Mesurier, founder of Mayday Rescue, who helped establish Syria Civil Defence (SCD), also known as the White Helmets. Bombing was relentless, leaving communities in despair. "People were going to bed not knowing whether

they or their families would survive the night. The only certainty was that if their house were to be struck, there was no hope that anyone would come to rescue them. Families knew they would lie trapped in the rubble of their homes until they died. There was a despondency, a complete absence of any kind of hope."

The US, UK and other governments have been assisting the moderate Syrian

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Opposition Coalition in a number of non-lethal areas to support an inclusive, democratic country in the future. To this end, the Office for Syrian Opposition was set up to liaise with the opposition in Syria, understand the needs of communities and

present these needs to donor countries.

The concept of the SCD grew from a meeting between Le Mesurier and community leaders. "Contacts from Aleppo and Idlib were painting a depressing picture of hopelessness. And I had to tell them that we couldn't help."

The situation changed with an introduction to the Turkish volunteer search and rescue organisation – AKUT – which offered a training venue and to help develop courses for volunteers from Syria.

International funding, including from the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office, helped to establish a simple concept: Civilian volunteers make the hazardous journey to Turkey for intensive training in urban search and rescue, as well as basic emergency field medicine instruction. They return to Syria – a process equally fraught with danger – carrying lightweight rescue equipment back to their communities.

This was the genesis of the independent,

apolitical, non-denominational, neutral SCD, also known as the White Helmets.

It was a challenge setting this up without unintentionally reinforcing political or partisan groups, says Le Mesurier. But the founding ethos of the SCD is neutrality – they will rescue and assist anybody in need, whatever their political affiliations. “We have dug out and rescued fighters from the regime,” a White Helmet tells me.

This impartiality – despite some political factions attempting to co-opt them for their own agenda – lies at the core of the White Helmets.

Le Mesurier says: “When we were setting up the training, we could not find a doctrinal precedent for community protection in war. We ended up at the British National Archive.” It was here that he read the 1949 civil defence manuals. “These were fantastic and became part of our doctrine – hand-cranked air raid sirens, printing manuals and leaflets for the public and all.”

Le Mesurier explains that past experience with regard to post-conflict disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) usually focuses on policing. Despite billions of dollars spent in this area, these resources often end up being used against the donor country.

“We were looking to create an organisation through which fighters could demobilise into an impartial, apolitical, neutrality. If you provide local communities with the capacity to look after themselves, they can become the cornerstone of reconstruction and recovery.”

This approach has produced firm community support, one of the few success stories to come out of Syria. “The White Helmets are widely considered the only heroes of the revolution,” according to Le Mesurier, who says the concept of hope is of major strategic impact in war. So far, SCD members have saved more than 10,000 people, bringing hope to communities living under the most horrendous conditions.

And this is probably why the civil defence teams and their equipment are actively targeted by aerial bombardment.

Although civil defence forces enjoy protection under international humanitarian legislation and protocols, SCD members are deliberately targeted when carrying out humanitarian activities and many have lost their lives.

But the courses are as popular as ever, Le Mesurier tells me, outlining how these were put together: “We needed to deconstruct a typical disaster response and apply it to a war zone.”

A group of Syrians was invited to bring photos, videos and samples of building construction to help work out what training and equipment were required. Briefings from subject

From the frontline to Turkey, then back again

Just over a year ago this volunteer from Northern Aleppo (pictured below) lost a leg to a barrel bomb while trying to rescue civilians trapped after air raids on their homes. For months he fought depression, battling to find the right treatment in a country whose medical services have been eviscerated.

I met him on his first day back in uniform, as he was cheered and clapped by his colleagues when he rappelled down a training tower.

The stories the White Helmets tell are virtually beyond comprehension. One, a former English Literature student, speaks quietly about responding to several bombings a day, in between discussing his favourite plays. Each time he describes an incident where a victim did not survive – and of course, there are many – he apologises. “Every day we see bombings, aircraft, shelling. We are on the frontline. We see things worse than horror movies.”

He tells of locating victims in clothing factories, homes and schools, of blood and body parts, of children screaming, of mutilation, trauma. His smile is constant throughout the conversation, but his eyes tell their own story.

I hear how the abseiling volunteer lost his leg, a tale of bombings, lack of medical care (the first two field hospitals he was taken to had no equipment or staff), followed by inadequate aftercare and a struggle to reach Turkey, without documents, to get a prosthetic leg fitted.

Typically, his concern is for others, and to reach out to the rest of the world. “You must understand,” he tells me, “We are the real Syrian people, not the ones you hear about in the news. We are totally against those who take and kill the people who come to help us. We just want to live, nothing else. And we thank everyone who helps us.”

Le Mesurier says this man was an inspirational leader, responding in his own car when the only fire engine was destroyed. It is planned to train him in command and control, so he can carry on inspiring volunteers, showing that they will be looked after if they are injured.

Immediate needs are pressing. There are not enough volunteers to deal with the constant bombardment; they are exhausted. Funding does exist, but politics and bureaucracy seem to be hampering their disbursement.

These are good, ordinary people caught up in the bloody maelstrom of a truly brutal civil war, where civilians are deliberately slaughtered and their rescuers targeted. The volunteers despise zealots, are dismissive of politics and tired of factional rivalries.

“Our only common enemy is the killing machine,” one notes grimly.



Inspirational: This White Helmet is back in uniform after losing a leg to a barrel bomb

matter experts in Syrian regime’s bombing tactics, and munitions used, were also essential.

“You need the right kit, the right training and the right people,” according to Le Mesurier. “These guys are operating in an environment with virtually no electricity, diesel supplies are low and of poor quality and petrol is very expensive. They are driving through narrow streets, so big trucks can’t access all areas.”

Equipment – which has to be non-lethal and non-transferrable – must also be simple, manual, portable and non-electrical. “It is all analogue. You need a vehicle you can maintain with a hammer, a screwdriver and an arc welder,” says Le Mesurier.

“We’re in the process of designing a vehicle specifically for Syria – a little bit of firefighting capability, a little bit for search and rescue, some medical...” Importantly, it will be designed to look like an ordinary vehicle so as not to present an easy target. One White Helmet tells me that they took delivery of a number of fire appliances just weeks before – most have already been damaged or destroyed by bombing.

Operational procedures

Le Mesurier explains how INSARAG standards were dissected and adapted for high intensity conflict. Modules were developed on medical trauma, as were standard operational procedures for war, such as lighting and working at night.

He shows me around the training stands at AKUT, which use the same type of concrete and rebar as in Syrian buildings. A tower for working at height stands next to a collapsed building simulator, complete with Syrian-style steel outer door and wooden inner door.

The medium level course focuses heavily on firefighting, with trainees spending four or five days working on forcible entry and tackling different types of fire. Other training simulations include a burnt out van, a building collapse caused by a barrel bomb and confined space rescue.

The number of women rescuers is also growing – from none just a few months ago, to more than 50. “All of these people have an incredible story,” says Le Mesurier. “They come from all walks of life and that’s an incredible benefit; plumbers, lawyers, accountants and doctors – many of them people of independent wealth who could have left Syria and who have stayed.

“These guys are amazing.”

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■ Syria Civil Defence is in desperate need of equipment and support – visit www.whitehelmets.org or www.maydayrescue.org

■ See page 78 for James Le Mesurier’s article on Syria’s Civil Defence