

# **STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA OPERATIONS SUPPORT TO THE SYRIAN MODERATE ARMED**

## **PART A - METHODOLOGY**

Given the UK's National Strategic Aim<sup>1</sup>, we understand that the purpose of this project is to contribute to an effective and credible Syrian MAO through Strat Comm and Media Operations capacity building, and that the objective of the project is to contribute to the transition away from the current regime and VE to a more stable, accountable, open and inclusive Syria founded on respect for human rights and rule of law through building the communications competence and reputation of the MAO (precise definitions are fluid but will be pinned down at the right time). This should take 'bottom up' approach, noting that the drift within oppositionist armed groups over the past two years has been towards the 'extreme' end of the spectrum a gradual 'knitting together' of the key units at the various fronts is required. To this end, the project should be based in Istanbul and Jordan (on first analysis) and supporting the strategic idea of a pan-Front leadership.

**Capabilities** We note the capabilities set out in Section 12 of the SoR points a-i. More follows.

### **Note on networks**

Through our work at the Geneva peace talks with the NC early this year, the NC's reputation enjoyed a significant turnaround at that time. We now have good contacts across networks – not simply through the NC but more broadly across activist networks, and in the cultural sphere. Leveraging networks is about more than relying on one or two; success depends on actively cross-pollinating so that otherwise closed activist networks benefit from professional techniques and mentoring. This amplifies their messaging and resonance and enables them to achieve greater recognition and impact. We are confident that we can reach the parts we need. We also know there are also good, experienced Syrian cadres in the region who have worked on other HMG or US funded projects, and are open to working with the winner of the contract, whoever that may be. We will explore that option also.

### **Tasks**

This section will examine the outputs, grouping them for convenience sake (though this categorisation is not mutually exclusive) into strat comms outputs and media operations capacity building.

### **Strategic communication support**

- a. Enhance the reputation of the Syrian MAO amongst the Syrian population, the Region and the International Community; Syrians are to be the primary target audience.
- b. Promote the MAO as a credible guarantor of future security in Syria.
- c. Build greater Syrian popular support for the MAO and strengthen the RFS brand.
- d. Undermine the Assad regime narrative through the effective use of communication.
- e. Counter violent extremist narratives by promoting the MAO as a credible alternative.

We have excellent track both supporting military forces in a theatre of operations, and enhancing reputation and media performance of high profile and key Syrians. Beginning in 2009, we supported the African Union Peacekeeping Force in Somalia, AMISOM, in all aspects of their communications (core narrative, media and spokesperson training, arranging key international meetings, retreats, creating products such as a Force magazine and other identity-creating and reputation enhancing products). The audiences for these were multiple, for example: internal Somali, Federal Government of Somalia, internal AMISOM, troop-contributing countries, regional, international, and international institutional. In 2014, we ran the communications team for the Syrian National Coalition at the Geneva Peace talks, during which we developed credible networks amongst the Syrian opposition forces. Note a selection of press coverage:

- "From low expectations, the Geneva gave [the NC] status and parity with their opponent, and an ambition to improve their credibility. (BBC)
- "[In Geneva], the opposition, which has long been dismissed as incapable of true leadership, gained much-needed credibility both in Syria and abroad. The opposition's performance in Geneva suggests the government does have a clear counterpart in negotiations." (Time)

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<sup>1</sup> A more stable and democratic Syria that better meets the needs and aspirations of its people and presents a significantly reduced threat to regional and international security and stability.

- "...The opposition [were] performing better than before - and far better than the Syrian government - with the assistance of strategic communications advisers provided by the British government and other western backers." (Guardian)
- "After nearly three years of amateurish press efforts - always mismatched against the regime's well-oiled propaganda machine - the opposition now seemed to be playing hardball." (Buzzfeed)

The research and planning phase of the project will begin with a review of programming since October 2013 and supporting documentation relating to this and other Conflict Pool-funded programming. The proposed activities will be set out on a timeline and communications grid informed and guided by the core narrative and key messages.

### Concept

A diverse range of programming outputs and capacity building is needed to achieve the aims. Formats that reflect the cultural values and traditions of the Syrian people will ensure that core outputs enjoy greater credibility amongst their audiences and reinforce the notion that ISIS is un-Syrian. The project will leverage social media platforms with significant youth audiences. This will enable the MAO to confront ISIS on the virtual battlefield and discredit it. We will focus on the negative impact of ISIS's activities on civilians, and long-term consequences of political and social fragmentation. But crucially we will develop a concept/brand that draws together all the campaign elements – and creates heroes. **This at the same time enhances the reputation of the MAO, promotes it as a credible guarantor of, undermines the regime and discredits ISIS. This is all reported on and amplified by our in-country networks**

**‘THE ANSWER LIES IN THE BRAND’** Branding is crucial to campaign identity, audience and value attraction, and success. This proposal seeks to accomplish that by putting forward a distinct brand platform around which different communications elements can be built. It is a ‘brand strategy’ designed to attract a following, provide diverse product options and stimulate engagement and behaviours within its target audience. Building this brand platform will involve establishing a symbolic visual identity and a set of specific values and associations, focused on portraying our target audience as they would like to think they could be. We will use the brand to drive a master narrative and related ‘stories’. And we will deliver those ‘stories’ largely through the internet, and using a diverse range of communications products. A brand-led approach will offer the following advantages. It will: (1) Inject a new and exciting element into the information space; (2) Provide an immediate campaign focus to our activities; (3) Accelerate our ability to get campaign traction rapidly; (4) Establish a defined platform for measurable outcomes.

**BRAND THEME: ‘LIONS OF RAQQA’** We have developed a core brand theme that we believe, on the basis of preliminary advice from our cultural advisers in Syria, will be acceptable to potential target audiences. We shall conduct formal pre-launch research within a wider group to stress-test our preliminary assumptions.



The central theme of this CVE initiative is **heroic resistance at the heart of the Islamic State**. The following paragraph is contained in a report datelined The National Museum, Damascus, May 2014. The report – one of many similar reports – details atrocities, coercion and destruction committed by ISIS in the city ([link here](#))

*On 4/25/14 DAASH militia used a massive German built Hydrema excavator to smash two historic statues of Assyrian lions from Raqqa Governorate believed to date from 727 B.C. nearly 2000 years before Islam. According to eyewitnesses who spoke with a Raqqa leader of the Al Qaeda affiliate, the DAASH officials explained that the Lions were of pagan provenance (origin) and were an insult to Islam because the depicted living creatures and must have been idols of some sort.*



Arabic text reads: "Lions of Raqqa"

Our brand (see symbol at left) will be based on this ancient symbol. We shall use it to 'resurrect' the 'Lions of Raqqa'. We shall 'bring back to life' what the millenarian ISIS death cults has physically destroyed, and throw this ancient symbolic representation of the life of Syria back in the face of those sworn to kill it. This 'life' symbol will be represented through stories (content) of immense bravery of people in Raqqa who, armed with mobile phones, knowledge of the internet, and techniques developed to protect their identities, are documenting the atrocities of ISIS at the centre of its phony Caliphate.

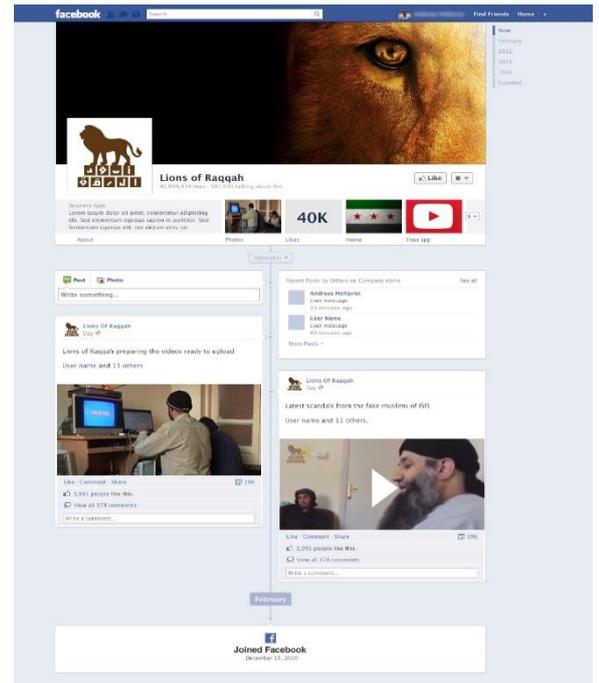
Our campaign will focus on the 'very heart' of the Caliphate. It will represent a form of 'direct attack' against the focal point of ISIS's ideological, political and military ambitions — with all that the risk these 'resistance fighters' run suggests to key target audiences, consciously and subconsciously. 'Heroic resistance' is a key element of this brand. ISIS and its fighters have projected a heightened jihadist glamour that is immensely psychologically appealing to recruits, especially foreign recruits from Europe. Our brand will provide a counterpoint, a riposte, to that glamour. Defiance of ISIS, and bravery in the

face of the cruel death that captured cadres would suffer at the hands of ISIS, will be a deliberate, psychologically structured counterpoint to the false virtue and bravura of ISIS's fighters. We will present our 'heroic resisters' as equally 'glamorous' – we will present them as 'cool', and even cooler, their ISIS adversaries – because they fight, armed and unarmed, in the face of ISIS's tyrannical, blood-lusting, nihilistic cruelty.

At the heart of our brand is a psychological dimension, an emotional root, that recognizes and subverts the appeal of the jihadist narrative, and provides a rallying call to moderate Syrians in search of heroism and hope. We will bring ideology and religious doctrine to bear but in such a way that our rebuttal and counterpoint carries equal and opposite emotional content whose objective is to subvert the emotional certainty of ISIS recruits or followers and, if possible, replace it with the emotional appeal of its heroic counterpoint – our brave resistance, our 'lions of Raqqa'.

**Content and mechanisms** ISIS's creative use of graphics and video to appeal to the youth demographic has been effective. This needs to be countered and possibilities are limited only by budget.

- Short audio-visual clips or longer-form documentaries.
- An 'internet wall' for the posting of resistance videos.
- 'Write-in' campaigns that 'lionise' resistance cadres in art and poetry.
- Create fictional material e.g. radio drama and digital 'comic' strips, for internet deployment.
- Use relationships with local/regional media to develop 'news-and-feature slots' featuring 'Lions Of Raqqa'.
- Online news magazine (12/15 per month) replaying 'tales from the resistance' – internet warriors, ambulance drivers, the food distribution workers, doctors etc. and offers advice on resistance techniques.
- Identify international platforms on which our 'resistance heroes' tell their story.
- Nominate heroes for international humanitarian and peace awards.
- Parallel Jihadi sites and JustPastel edicts (sheiks/leading figures within Jihadi orbs operating in Syria) that mimic yet refute the current viewpoints of ISIS and create rifts between JN, ISIS, and AQ; development and production of video products (16 videos/produced twice monthly) that falls under the ISIS brand that mimic yet refute current viewpoints of ISIS and further cause rifts between JN and ISIS; creation of Facebook pages as repositories of FB content; Twitter aggregators that promote the mimicked content



- Emotional response: Development of that creates the narrative of the everyday heroes and contrasts it to the violence caused by both the regime/VE groups, featuring the heroes of the current conflict, the Real heroes help Syrians, not kill Syrians.
- Counter Jihadi 'Cool' by offering alternatives that are 'more cool': an online campaign that utilizes the voices of disaffected fighters; online vignettes of former fighters that dispel the notion of the "coolness" of war and extremist groups and promotes the humanitarian 'cool' in its place; development of supplementary radio pieces to complement the vignettes, broadcast on Syrian-based radio channels.
- Anti-Sectarianism: utilizing public faces, of differing backgrounds and sects, namely artists, to repeat the Free Syria message. Through our networks we can access such figures.
- Using pictorially-heavy and creatively designed printed material in refugee camps and liberated areas to promote key messages, especially as inhabitants typically move from place to place;
- Dedicated channels ie NC / FSA channel, plus capacity for media buy and appearance fee for talking heads who counter CVE / regime narratives;
- Building an electronic army - if VE view the media as a form of Jihad, then so must resistance though media, too, must be lionised as a heroic activity;
- Create links with Staffan de Mistura and promote a negotiation process / political resolution with international support, and plan for 'Day After' Training - preparing for government after-Assad.

**Media consumption and landscape** A variety of media continues to be consumed (dramas, documentary, music etc) but there is an insatiable appetite for news – mainly TV and online, national and international. TV, a highly politicized mode of consumption, is the leading medium (Pan-Arab followed by Lebanese networks that cater to specific religious/political inclinations, then Jordanian networks). Smart mobile services are also significant, and then friends and family.. Mobile services are often trusted more than TV, especially in camp communities, as the diaspora and those within Syria are plugged into friends and family (whom they trust). For campaign planning purposes: (1) Online news channels – e.g. pro-Revolution All4Syria.com; Zamanalwasel.com; Citizen Journalists/Activists/Bloggers in the Diaspora, or pro-Regime: Syria-news.com; Newspapers Online, i.e. Al Baath Tichreen, Al Thawra, Sanaa- Official Syrian Arab News Agency; (2) Facebook pages of revolution coordination committees; FB represents the only free mass space where people can share thoughts and content; (3) YouTube is highly utilized for its ability to host uncensored reports from within Syria; dangers are in the production and dissemination of the videos by local producers; (4) Pan-Arab Television stations are watched by majority (Al-Arabiya, Al-Jazeera, France 24), plus Lebanese and Jordanian networks

**Geography:** We will work in eight regions. (1) Damascus Countryside (Damascus, Easter/Western Gouta, South Damascus, Kalamoun, Al-Zaidani); (2) Deraa (Deraa and countryside, Qunaytera and countryside, Suwaida); (3) Homs (surrounded Homs, Wa'ar, Homs countryside); (4) Hamah (and countryside); (5) Idleb (and countryside); (6) Aleppo (and countryside); (7) Coastal (Ladkiya and countryside, Jableh, Banyas, Tartous); (8) Eastern Province (Dair Azzour and countryside, Hasaka and countryside, Raqqa and countryside).

### **Media operations capacity build**

#### **f. Promote and reinforce positive attitudes and behaviours within the MAO.**

Promotion and reinforcement can be conducted through several processes (and feedback loops) including the carrying out of research and needs assessment, and subsequent capacity building in terms of organisational structuring, training, and a programme of ongoing mentoring. Following our deployment with the NC during the Geneva peace talks and building of the media office, we know the following to be effective in the Syrian context: research (communication objectives, information environment and communication culture), structure and management design / amendment, recruitment or retraining, general and specialist training, coaching and mentoring programme. The research and planning phase of the overall project would begin to identify requirements via the project's track record.

**Sustainability** Network personnel are Syrian and therefore vast majority of staff are Syrian. The general audiences identified as beneficiaries are Syrian internal. With mentoring, this leaves behind enhanced, empowering staff better placed to handle crises without recourse of outside help. Many digital and other media products will remain, as well as the skills used to develop them, wherever Syrians were trained or skillsets were enhanced.

**Target audience segmentation** Indicative/to be optimised following analysis post-commencement; There isn't the space here to go into greater details as to the regional and international segmentation, but those will include neighbouring countries (especially Turkey and Jordan) and regional allies, and the G11 nations.

SEGMENTATION	FOCUS AREAS	CHANNELS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ISIS</li> <li>• ANF</li> <li>• Other Islamist groups</li> <li>• Regime</li> <li>• Muslim Brotherhood</li> <li>• FSA, RFS other MAO</li> <li>• National Coalition</li> <li>• Minority (eg Christians, Alawites etc)</li> <li>• ISIS-occupied</li> <li>• Regime-occupied</li> <li>• Refugees and IDPs</li> <li>• 'Moderates'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Free Syria' core narrative incl. counter extremism</li> <li>• Countering IS propaganda, building 'defiant heroes'</li> <li>• Questioning legitimacy motives, actions, hypocrisy</li> <li>• Strengthening Syrian CVE voices</li> <li>• Counter foreign fighters in Syria</li> <li>• Security issues &amp; forming united pro-Revolution front</li> <li>• Peace, stabilisation, reconciliation</li> <li>• Political process to advance cross-community cohesion, reassurance of minorities</li> <li>• Women's and children's rights</li> <li>• Media freedoms</li> <li>• Cultural and traditional values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet (main focus) + TV/radio programming</li> <li>• VNRs to local and pan-Arab media</li> <li>• Social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, JustPasteIt, Whatsapp, Sound Cloud)</li> <li>• Print publications</li> <li>• SMS messaging</li> <li>• KLE where possible</li> </ul>

**Outputs:** The following sets out an analysis of the outputs (desired effects) in section 17 of the SoW.

Output	Indicator	Baseline	Target (including date)	Source of information & who will collect
A	Beginning or increase in MO output including media production; beginning or increase web-based communications, media list developed, increase in interviews and press outreach conducted	Nil - 24/7 media office capability non-existent.	Baseline 5/1/15 Interim monthly assessments; Six-month output tracking analysis (c. 5/6/15); One year output tracking analysis (c. 5/12/15); Final analysis (5/3/16)	MO Media log, including time of output, atmospheric, web analytics, media monitoring; Albany / Syria Conflict Pool to be clarified
B	Analysis of capacity in the Fronts, using key interviews and other measures, analysis of effects, assessment of Front-coordination, existence of MAO comms grid or other efforts	Nil - programming not yet begun	Baseline 5/1/15 - 19/1/15 Interim monthly assessments; Six-month capacity analysis (c. 5/6/15); One year capacity analysis (c. 5/12/15); Final analysis (5/3/16)	Key interviews, atmospheric, web analytics, media monitoring; Albany / Syria Conflict Pool to be clarified
C	MAO increase in media recognition as an entity, enhanced reputation as a credible alternative	Nil - programming not yet begun	Baseline 5/1/15 - 19/1/15 Interim monthly assessments; Six-month narrative tracking analysis (c. 5/6/15); One year narrative tracking analysis (c. 5/12/15); Final analysis (5/3/16)	Key interviews, atmospheric, web analytics, media monitoring; Albany / Syria Conflict Pool to be clarified

## Part B - TECHNICAL AND QUALITY DELIVERY

Albany's experience with risk management has been gathered in some of the most difficult environments in the world. For example, Somalia is one such place, where we have been operating successfully since 2009, at a time when virtually no international organisations would operate there due to the risks. Currently, for example, we are working in Darfur, Libya, DRC, South Sudan, and many others across the Middle East and Africa. Our approach to risk management is similar to that of other organisations, such as DfID and other international funders in that it incorporates sector-wide best practice and hard won local, on-the-ground experience. Further, our experience in working with the SNC has exposed us to and helped identify real risks and challenges. Please see initial Framework documentation for further details (2.1.6).

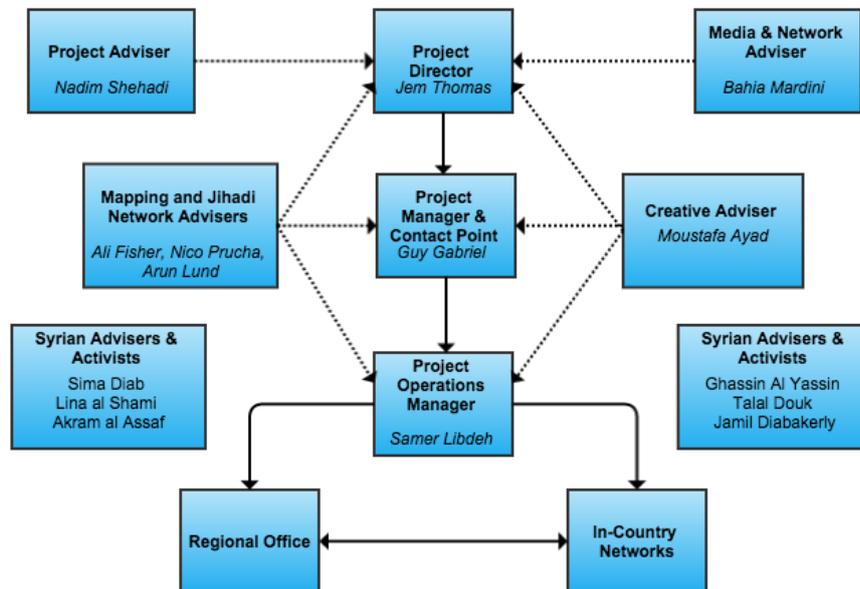
Risk	Likelihood	Impact	How we will mitigate risks	Risk owner
Timeline - in environments such as the Syria of today, it is possible that events or activities may be subject to delay, such as disruptions to supply chains, cancellation of meetings, or impassability of certain key roads.	High	Medium	Such occurrences will be dealt with as they arise, with alternative suppliers, means of communication and routes planned wherever possible. Our experienced team staff and suggested structures reduce the potential for delay, but it cannot be eliminated.	Albany
Impact: Solutions offered may achieve weaker effects than desired; lack of audience interest	Low	Medium	Using tried and tested techniques, excellent network research & preparation and trusted human networks. Syrians inherently have a large appetite for information and news.	Albany
Regime and ISIS media machine strong and functional, a formidable opponent.	Medium	Low	Clear comms strategy with flexibility built in, excellent research into regime and ISIS methodology, and innovative counter measures deployed. Using Syrian developers and Syrian deliverers.	Albany
MAO commanders unconvinced of need, unwilling to cooperate with contractor or each other	Medium - High	High	Time and care taken on relationship development, clear and careful enunciation of the need	Albany
Changes can occur to the political and military discourse - such as change in likelihood of Peace Talks restarting, change in Russian or Iranian stance towards Syria - requiring tweaking to the strategy.	Medium	Low	Part of the ongoing M&E for the campaign is to monitor the political and military environment in which it is taking place, and track the discourse describing it. Each set of activities will be presaged by an evaluation of appropriateness and relevance to the time and place.	Albany
Senior media buy-in: Senior management in media organisations are not supportive of the strat comm programming or uninterested in the news prospect of MAO commanders	Low	Medium	Preliminary and encouraging discussions have taken place with eg al Arabiya, other regional Arabic language outlets. Offering quality production encourages broadcast by media organisations; offering MAO commanders for interview is genuine news	Albany
Networks don't produce as fully as necessary due to access reasons or	Low	High	The overarching strategy is designed to be flexible, meaning that the overall coherence and momentum of the campaign is	Albany

instability.			not lost as a result of reasonable and unforeseeable delays. Risk is spread by large choice of locations and using networks animated by trusted figures; local Syrian organisations well organised at the micro level and digital networks are well established and innovative. MAO are resilient individuals, hence media production capacity and general output resilient	
Difficulty operating physically.	Low	Medium	Digital strategies to mitigate problems; clear local advice sought at all time, and experienced operators used. MAO are resilient individuals, hence media production capacity and general output resilient	Albany
Digital platform and branding fails to take off.	Low	Low	Digital element of comms strategy clear and robust, with promotion across many other channels; regular M&E and analytics to check on progress and remediate as necessary. Product testing to ensure resonance.	Albany
Technological issues arise on platforms	Low	Med	Professional technical support is included to backstop on demand; servers held outside of Syria in areas easy to service. Different digital methods in place to ensure continual flow of information.	Albany
Security risks to personnel.	Low	High	Outside Syria staff operating in generally stable environments eg Turkey, Jordan; staff in Syria operate only under security conditions which permit it; digital engagement strategies to help mitigate instability in areas; majority of staff from the region; regular security updates. MAO are resilient individuals, hence media production capacity and general output resilient. If security issues arise, we will use our established Safety and Security Protocols (SSPs) for staff under threat..	Albany

Do you understand the potential risks and have the knowledge and experience to develop an effective risk plan for your staff? Do you have the capability to manage their Duty of Care responsibilities throughout the life of the contract?	Yes
Are you prepared to work collaboratively with other HMG implementing partners when required	Yes

## Part C - RESOURCE

We propose a dedicated core project team for this requirement. This section sets out the key elements of Project Management. In order to avoid accusations of sectarianism, input into the project would require individuals representing all major ethnicities and sects, though this is not necessarily represented in this brief space. Albany, as a commercial entity, operates strictly under the auspices of ISO 9001:2008. Organogram:



### Syrian Networks and Media Adviser

*Bahia Mardini* is a journalist and media adviser to the Syrian National Coalition and served as Chief of Staff for the delegation of the Syrian National Coalition at the Geneva II peace process. She has reported for Al-Arabiya, Nesf Al Dounia Magazine and Al Hurra TV. Fluent in English and Arabic, she has an extensive network of relevant contacts in the political, humanitarian and journalistic fields in Syria and the region.

### Project advisor

*Nadim Shehadi* is director of the Fares Centre for Eastern Mediterranean Studies at Tufts University, and an associate fellow of Chatham House. With expertise in Syria, Lebanon and the Middle East Peace Process (Refugees), he is also a consultant to several governments and international organizations. He has produced several publications and contributes regularly to media coverage of Middle Eastern affairs.

### Mapping and analysis advisers

*Nico Prucha* is a fellow at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH), University of Hamburg. His research focuses on textual and audiovisual content analysis of al-Qa`ida activity online, specifically focusing on jihadist Shari`a law interpretation of hostage taking and executions. He has written frequently on the subject, such as for Jane's and blogs at Jihadica.

*Dr. Ali Fisher* is an adviser, strategist and author on methods of achieving influence across a range of disciplines including public diplomacy and strategic communication, counterterrorism, child protection, human security, and public health. Authored Collaborative Public Diplomacy published earlier this year.

*Aron Lund*, editor of [Syria in Crisis](#) at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, has published extensively on Syrian opposition movements and military dynamics. Regular contributor to various journals and newspapers, Lund has published two books and many reports on Syrian militias and opposition politics.

### Bell Pottinger Communications USA LLC (BPCUSA)

A wholly owned subsidiary of The Kestrel Group LLC operating from Tampa, Florida with Top Secret facility clearance, they have eight years of successful past performance with the US Government (USG), and have completed five contracts with the USG (USSOCOM and USCENTCOM) in the Middle East supporting similar strategic communications objectives, and are currently prime contractor on USG contract with similar requirements for strategic communications, media operations and logistics working in seven different countries internationally.