

In line with the Stabilisation Unit's understanding (June 2016), we take on board the definition of conflict sensitivity as "acting with the understanding that any initiative conducted in a conflict-affected environment will interact with that conflict and that such interaction will have consequences that may have positive or negative effects." Therefore, we deliberately and systematically seek to understand and minimise the risks of our activities, while maximising the positive effects. To achieve this, we need to understand the context, understand the interaction between our engagement and the content, and act upon this understanding in order to reduce risk and maximise benefit. This is different to being risk averse, which is not a position we can take if we are operating in Syria. In designing this project, we have applied Do No Harm principles at each stage, and we have made every endeavour to assess in advance what impact will we have on the things that divide and create tension among communities. Will the resources we bring in cause problems by being perceived to favouring one side of the other?

The risks of working in such a complex environment as Syria are many. In this context, risks could include deepening divisions between groups, inadvertently supporting the rise of one group that is not aligned to UK policy through the intentional undermining of another group. Since the Syrian conflict began in March 2011, a citizen uprising calling for reform and the Syrian regime's brutal mismanagement of the protests, the conflict has grown to one of unremitting savagery, parsing Syria along geographic, sectarian, political and factional lines. The conflict, now a proxy war, pits the Syrian regime, comprised of the Government, Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah against a deeply divided opposition comprised of armed groups - ranged along a spectrum from relatively moderate to Jihadi-Islamist - and an expatriated political representation. While the Syrian people have a history of moderation, a sense of injustice and abandonment by the international community has enhanced receptiveness to effective extremist narratives.

The net result is an opposition terrain of quickly shifting alliances and allegiances, challenging identification as moderate. For historical and political reasons the opposition has been unable to produce a political leadership of sufficient legitimacy and acceptance to unify governance and the armed groups. It has been unable to create an environment where funders have been comfortable providing the kind of arms support that would be decisive in fighting the regime. In the meantime, Russia, raising its profile in the autumn of 2015 has proven a very decisive force on behalf of the regime.

The Albany Associates Consortium approaches the implementation of the MOR project with the understanding that development of a central narrative or "master story" which is evocative enough to engage a diversity of actors and broad enough to encompass armed groups, civil society, local government, journalists, and activists can contribute to a unity of communications based on a unity of understanding – a fundamental building block to reinforcing moderation. The volatility of the environment, as described above, demands a project that is highly tuned to the Syrian opposition context and adaptable. We have responded to this, proposing a Consortium which includes a very well respected and capacitated Syrian media organization, Enab Baladi, the experience of Albany in remote management, conflict environments, the unparalleled technical depth of Saatchi, the world's largest communications network, and ORB International with its proven ability to provide audience insight throughout Syria. Our approach, focusing on a consultatively developed narrative – on fixed platforms or story lines per se, will allow the day to day flexibility needed in any-fast paced news organization. Redundancy, expressed in multiple networks, production hubs in Istanbul and Dubai, and approaches to technical support and training that are roving but not particularly vulnerable to non-permissive operational contexts will protect smooth implementation. A methodology which relies on iterative and highly consultative approaches across Syrian and technical networks will mean that the project is highly sensitive to and aware of changes and trends on the ground, and is able to calibrate and mitigate. Albany is not proposing approaches that leave things to chance and the vagaries of the very kinetic context – for example we are not proposing training and mentoring methodologies that would require movement of equipment or personnel across borders nor are we making assumptions that operational space in the countries bordering Syria will remain static over the next year and a half.

As a company, Albany has learnt this through operating in environments such as Somalia, Darfur, Iraq, Libya and more. For example, when working for the FCO at the Geneva II peace talks, we were aware that the Syrian National Coalition, whom we were directly supporting, had a limited popularity on the ground. Therefore, the strategic approach to our work with them focused on the universality of the message and appeal, broadening the SNC's approach to its popular base. One of the key aims was to avoid entrenching conflict by alienating potential supporters and critical masses of people needed to buy in to any peace agreement that resulted.