

ARK has delivered numerous trainings on a range of media topics, from citizen journalism workshops with Syrian media activists, to working with senior members of the National Coalition to develop a core communications narrative.

Citizen journalism. ARK has run numerous citizen journalism training courses, through Basma, ARK's grassroots communications project, in ARK's specialist residential training centre in southern Turkey, as well as in-country in Syria and online. More than 150 activists have been trained and equipped by ARK on topics from the basics of camera handling, lighting, and sound to producing reports, journalistic safety, online security, and ethical reporting. A series of courses ran from late 2012 through to 2014, punctuated by a media activist conference hosted by Basma in February 2013 attended by more than 200 beneficiaries. Amongst other topics, the conference agreed the importance of coordinated and cohesive messaging between the numerous activist groups represented and the need for improved technical capabilities; closed online groups were subsequently created and mentored by Basma to facilitate this. Run by a well-known ARK-employed Syrian citizen journalist trainer, Basma's subsequent residential workshop series then sought to train activists either from or linked to this original group. At first, in an effort to both up-skill beneficiaries and improve local coordination, activists were invited by governorate for the multi-day training courses; the final trainings then progressed to pan-governorate coordination, with activists invited from several different governorates. Trainings were run on a monthly basis. After each course, closed online groups for participants were created and run by Basma, which allowed for ongoing mentoring. The trainings were oversubscribed, and in a reflection of their success, many beneficiaries subsequently became stringers for pan-Arab stations or became part of Basma's network as stringers and disseminators: nine of the current sixteen Al Jazeera stringers in Syria were trained by ARK.

Basma has also mentored hundreds of other media activists, with weekly Skype training sessions. In addition, Basma designed and disseminated an instructional citizen journalism handbook with a print run of 5,000 in 2014. The handbook was well received, was adopted by other activist training organisations, and was even reported on by international media outlets such as VICE.

Press Releases. In December 2013, ARK organised a workshop for opposition media offices of the NC, IG, and ACU aimed at developing their external statements. This was the third media communications workshop organised by ARK for the opposition; the second had focused on the practical implementation of communications plans, with particular emphasis on the 'tools of the trade' (press conferences, background briefings, exclusive interviews, holding lines, damage control etc.). The third seminar looked at distinguishing between press statements and news releases, and also sought to improve press officers' abilities to target and engage desired audiences ('the ladder of engagement') – both of which were areas ARK had, in conjunction with HMG and after consultation with a range of stakeholders and beneficiaries, identified as weaknesses. The workshop included a notable digital media component presented by Michael Slaby, US President Obama's Digital Campaign Chief (part of ARK's SME network). Slaby's popular presentation explained the details of the digital media space, emphasising the need for data integration across media contact databases.

In conjunction with a variety of other HMG-funded efforts, this training series culminated in a widely hailed opposition performance at the Geneva II conference. Notably, opposition media offices started to discuss statements with each other for awareness and feedback prior to publication. Participant feedback, gathered through course evaluation forms and M&E interviews conducted at all ARK workshops, was positive about the training; in a further indication of the value of the training, in 2014 the Interim Government formally requested further follow-up communications training along similar lines through ARK. ARK also co-authored an op-ed on behalf of the President of the National Coalition in the run up to

Geneva II, published in the Washington Post, setting out the Coalition's position to the international community. Key learning points from this workshop series included the value added by Arabic-speaking trainers, given the importance of close engagement and connection to beneficiaries in order to stimulate open discussion – a fact reflected in the composition of ARK's core staff and trainer network. Similarly, ARK maintains strong, trust-based relationships with both the political opposition and activists on the ground, established and fostered since the beginning of the revolution, which is critical when working with beneficiaries to design interventions in this environment.

Speeches. As part of its routine activity, ARK works closely with (and is often asked by) members of the political opposition to input and provide advice on speeches and other media appearances. ARK helped draft an acceptance speech for current IG Prime Minister Ahmad Tomeh prior to his appointment, for example, and also advised Monzer Akbiq, Media Advisor to the then-President of the NC, Ahmad al-Jarba, on international statements.

ARK staff regularly work with senior opposition officials, from former SOC and NC President George Sabra, to Head of the ACU, Suheir Atassi, to current NC President Hadi Al Bahra, a relationship that began when he was chief NC negotiator in Geneva. In the latter example, ARK helped connect the Syrian delegation to activists on the ground, particularly in Homs, where ARK helped facilitate provision of evidence of the need for humanitarian assistance and an end to the siege of the city, enabling the delegation to present convincing (and ultimately successful) arguments and speeches in an international arena. In their personal capacity, ARK staff often have input into Political Committee speeches, to ensure they hit the right revolutionary note, particularly amongst youth. Recently, for example, ARK staff were on hand to advise NC figures on their public response to US President Obama's speech setting out America's strategy against the ISIL.

ARK has been able to use these networks, relationships, and speech-writing experience laterally, to the advantage of all its HMG programmes; for example, inviting Iyad Qudsi, IG Deputy Prime Minister, to Syrian civil defence training in July 2014 and advising him on his speech to the teams: this was well-received and helped build a bridge between the civil defence teams and the Syrian IG. Basma staff, based in Gaziantep, also meet weekly with IG Ministers to advise on media handling and discuss upcoming media opportunities.