ARK's commitment to Syrian participation is demonstrated by the composition of its staff, of which 40% are Syrian nationals, and particularly its Communications team, which is almost entirely Syrian and fully staffed by native Arabic speakers. This ensures Syrians are the driving force behind designing and delivering communications projects. ARK promotes conflict sensitivity across all its work; this requires an inclusive and participatory approach to conceptualising, implementing and assessing the effect of any project activity or product. Syrian involvement at ARK is therefore a key part in all stages of a project activity cycle.

**Participation through the Project Cycle**

**Design.** The design process takes place at two levels: the overall project and product level.

- **At the project level,** ARK's Syrian staff members play an essential role in the project context assessment as well as in the creative intervention brainstorm process. Syrian staff are part of the development of a project, leading or providing feedback on drafts of a project design. Beyond its in-house knowledge, ARK also draws on the opinions and suggestions of its programme beneficiaries to identify needs and priorities on the ground and test the feasibility of project ideas.

- **At the product level,** in all steps of the conceptualisation of a product, from the identification of topics and appropriate target audiences to word choice and aesthetic preferences, ARK's Syrian staff lead the process. Syrian media professionals create products in line with the identified objectives and later adjust these products in light of feedback. To generate this, a large number of products are tested in focus groups conducted with Syrians in Turkey. Products are presented to a small group of purposely selected Syrian nationals representative of the product's intended target to collect opinions on the clarity of a product's message, possible interpretations, its resonance with the group and suggestions for improvement. Participants typically spend one to three hours in a facilitated discussion critiquing a product or series of products within a single campaign. ARK has built a database of over 800 engaged Syrians living in Turkey to draw from, led by ARK's majority-Syrian Focus Group Unit (FGU).

**Implementation.**

- **At the production stage,** once the design of a media product or campaign has been finalised, it is sent to production. For print products, where necessary and depending on locations and costs, Syrian manufacturers or print-houses are used to ensure access to target audiences. Products are often printed in-country – in besieged areas, for example, this is the only option.

- **At the dissemination stage,** when planning a media project's dissemination strategy, ARK draws on its staff's nuanced understanding of the complex Syrian media and political environment, its Syrian media usage surveys, as well as information on the latest developments on the ground to ensure effective dissemination to the target audience within project, budgetary and risk considerations. ARK will also reach out to its extensive network of Syrian and regional contacts to explore the possibility of cooperation (such as when ARK-trained Civil Defence teams helped disseminate ARK-produced HMG posters to augment public health and safety measures, including material warning of the dangers of unexploded ordnance and disease). When appropriate, surveys and interviews with Syrian stakeholders are conducted in order to feed into a product or campaign's dissemination plan. A documentary featuring the Aleppo Free Police was screened at several workshops attended by Syrian policemen; after each screening a mini-survey was administered to collect additional feedback prior to the launch of the documentary, as well as inform its dissemination plan.
Monitoring and Evaluation.

- **When conducting monitoring for a project**, Syrian participation is critical, particularly when a media project is aimed exclusively at Syrian audiences. In such cases, the only way to gather data on the effect of a product or project activity is to reach out to the concerned Syrian audiences. This is done through a variety of channels, including ARK’s dissemination network, project beneficiaries and/or field researchers, using tools such as surveys, key stakeholder interviews, and media monitoring. Even in designing the tools used for data collection, ARK’s M&E team will ensure review by Syrian staff members prior to use to ensure cultural appropriateness and relevance. To date, the vast majority of ARK’s communication activities have targeted a Syrian audience which means that any data collected for the purposes of monitoring was done with the assistance of Syrian staff and with Syrian audiences. Here also, ARK reverts to its Syrian project beneficiaries to understand the utility and suitability of media products through feedback loops set-up between beneficiaries and ARK project officers.

- **When evaluating a project** and assessing whether or not it achieved its intended objectives, a process of identifying lessons from ongoing and completed activities helps ARK inform subsequent activities/projects and overall programming. As detailed, this is done through assessment activities such as a large scale media survey among Syrians or feedback from users or audiences inside Syria on specific products disseminated. The ARK M&E team will then support project teams to ensure uptake of this feedback so that lessons can be incorporated in project strategy and implementation as appropriate.

**Illustrative example**

**Basma: Syrian media production.** As an example of Syrian involvement and participation in project activity, ARK has run an HMG grassroots strategic communications project known as ‘Basma’ (‘fingerprint’ in Arabic) in Turkey/Syria since 2012. Basma currently consists of a well-networked, entirely-Syrian production team based in Gaziantep, in the south of Turkey, with an extensive network of affiliated stringers and other partners in Syria and amongst the external Syrian opposition and diaspora. An external HMG MOD (DSTL) evaluation of Basma in early 2014 assessed that Basma is a “credible, responsive, professional, competent and highly-driven organisation. Basma has an almost-unique capability to message the internal Syrian opposition network, the rest of the Syrian public (including all social groups within Syrian society), and (to a much lesser extent) the international audience... The trust that activists place in Basma has been hard-won and is fragile.” It concluded that the capability that Basma had built was “the result of long-term investment in both external donor funding and activist engagement”. Finally it stated that, “if the UK wishes to continue to build moderate opposition communications capability and counter-radicalising ideologies within Syria, Basma can and should play a key role in the UK’s approach and the UK should continue to invest in Basma”, demonstrating both the centrality of Syrians to ARK’s project activity and the success that this approach has nurtured.

**Online presence.** One aspect of Basma that is particularly illustrative of Syrian involvement is its online platforms. Managed entirely by Basma’s Syrian staff, Basma’s Arabic Facebook page has over half a million followers and has become central to project activity, where it is used as a platform to effectively reach many Syrians; Basma similarly has a significant Arabic YouTube and Skype presence. An independent evaluation of Basma’s social media presence in mid-2014 concluded that Basma’s “Facebook and YouTube sites have comparable performance to some of the most popular and relevant political organisations on the Internet".