

ARK has a track record of developing strategic communication functions in political institutions. In the six months preceding the widely hailed opposition performance at the Geneva II (GII) negotiations in early 2014, ARK worked closely with the Syrian opposition writ large to enhance their strategic communications capacity and capability, with a particular focus on the NC and NC Presidency, in close coordination with the HMG communications advisor and other HMG programmatic and diplomatic efforts.

Central to developing strategic communications functions within any institution is the development and entrenching of a consistent, core narrative. In the first instance, the audience for this agreed narrative is internal, helping unite the institution around a core vision. Senior leadership buy-in to this is key. In the Syrian context, the external audience must then be segmented into numerous target audiences, including the Syrian regime and regime-supporters, the international community, in-country opposition, extremist groups, the general population inside Syria, and refugee and diaspora communities – to distinguish differing attitudes and behaviours, as well as their underpinning drivers/motivators, identify desired outcomes and opportunities for influence, and from that, tailor and deliver effective messaging as appropriate. All of these groups require further subdivision to target optimally.

Development of a core Syrian opposition narrative was initiated at an ARK-run workshop in July 2013, in collaboration with HMG, for political figures from the NC and media offices affiliated to Syrian opposition institutions. The workshop, which primarily aimed to facilitate the start of the development of a core narrative, was closed by FCO Minister Burt and well received. Subsequently, anecdotal monitoring of perceptions both internationally and in Syria noted that the opposition narrative showed indications of improved unity.

Crucially, this initial phase was then built upon; HMG subsequently awarded ARK funding for further workshops focused on technical press office and media handling skills, providing valuable opportunities for further engagement and entrenchment of strategic communications functions. As a result of the training and strong relationships, the opposition also formally requested media advice from a number of ARK staff members. ARK communications experts were therefore able to work closely with the NC media office and HMG communications advisor to develop a core narrative based on workshop outputs for NC Political Committee approval. Complementing these efforts, ARK's senior Syrian staff routinely work with leading members of the political opposition as part of their day-to-day roles, acting as a bridge between external representatives and grassroots activists inside Syria to guide political responses and strategic communications. They have accompanied senior figures on international trips to provide communications advice (including at GII).

To develop this further, ARK would conduct a formal baseline survey of Syrian attitudes towards the institution in question, utilising its majority Syrian communications capability, well-networked research and analysis team and its strong, trust-based relationships with Syrian opposition figures and organisations. Results would be communicated to stakeholders and interventions designed accordingly in partnership with all stakeholders. These would likely cover both strategic and operational aspects including: establishing a clear internal information flow (including editorial meetings, media grids and messaging priorities) to ensure messages are constantly aligned; assist in developing unambiguous strategic communications responsibilities; synchronisation/coordination of messages with other institutions; branding exercises; crisis communications training; creation/augmentation of social and digital media; internal media monitoring and analysis training (or out-sourced support) to assess and improve impact of communications and understand and counter competitor narratives; production support; training on keeping a story in the public eye (including through full use of multi-media platforms, angles and the news cycle); and mentoring of key spokespeople and leadership.