As part of its programming to build civil defence (CD) capability and capacity in Syria, and to draw attention to the work of local services and the moderate civilian population, ARK developed an internationally-focused, English-language communications campaign aimed at raising global awareness of the teams and their life saving work. As a key part of this, ARK created and continues to run a Twitter feed and Facebook page on behalf of the Civil Defence teams, posting photos and updates on their activities in English multiple times a day. The campaign approach was developed in conjunction with ARK’s Turkish civil defence training partner AKUT, the local CD teams, the National Coalition, the Interim Government and other implementer partners.

International journalists from leading networks and newspapers have been able to follow and contact the teams through these social media accounts, resulting in a number of TV features and articles on civil defence activities, including interviews carried out with the teams during their ARK-run training sessions in Turkey. New York-based advocacy group The Syria Campaign (TSC) also reached out to the civil defenders through the Twitter feed to understand more about their operations. Following subsequent discussions with ARK and the teams, TSC selected Civil Defence to front its campaign to keep Syria in the news, and TSC and ARK began working together to develop a mutually beneficial campaign focusing on the work of the teams. ARK arranged for TSC to attend its Civil Defence training sessions in southern Turkey, providing access to the teams and the ability to create high quality media content for its #whitehelmets campaign - launched in August 2014 – without members of TSC having to travel into Syria to do so. The ARK Communications team’s video archive of CD teams was also shared with TSC. ARK had previously coordinated with other implementers to ensure that all uniforms and equipment provided to the teams were standard, ensuring a recognisable ‘brand’ for the teams. The first video in a four part series created by TSC had over 410,000 views on YouTube by mid-September, with the ARK-run Twitter feed and Facebook followership also increasing exponentially.

Building on the success of these complementary traditional and social media campaigns, two civil defenders, one form Idlib and one from Aleppo, were scheduled to travel with the Syrian opposition delegation to the UN General Assembly in September 2014. ARK and TSC have developed a visit schedule that includes meetings with 9/11 first responders, politicians and diplomats, and a number of media interviews, all aimed at raising the profile of the teams.

Challenges. One of the key issues that ARK has encountered as a direct result of the success of the campaign is the growing political interest in the teams by various factions within the external opposition, which have attempted to co-opt the teams in order to benefit from both donor government resources and the support and legitimacy the teams enjoy on the ground. Part of the mandate of civil defenders, as laid out in the Geneva Conventions, is their impartiality, and the teams do not want their actions to be viewed politically. ARK has therefore worked with all stakeholders to address the ownership of Civil Defence and underline the importance of its neutrality – this, and local public support, have allowed teams to continue operating without significant political interference. While this is an ongoing campaign, success to date is in line with, or has exceeded, programme indicators.