



## Syria Civil Defence

Popularly known as the White Helmets, Syria Civil Defence is a group of 3,000 volunteers, men and women, from local communities who have since 2013 risked their lives to save over 60,000 people — regardless of religious or political affiliation — from underneath the rubble of buildings destroyed during the Syrian civil war. Bakers, tailors, salespersons, teachers — they are now trained fire-fighters, search and rescue workers, and medics. A lifeline and a rare source of hope for the besieged civilian population, Syria Civil Defence also support the reconstruction of damaged public infrastructure and educate children and adults on preventative safety measures to take during an aerial attack. Their deep commitment to humanitarian action has drawn international attention to the plight of civilians who have become victims of indiscriminate bombing in Syria, and they have been outspoken in calling for an end to the hostilities in the country.

### When the bombs rain down, the White Helmets rush in

Syria Civil Defence was formed in early 2013 in response to the indiscriminate bombing and shelling of the civilian population. Starting as an informal group of 12 people, the organisation now counts 3,000 volunteers operating from 121 centres throughout Syria. Syria Civil Defence is a neutral, impartial and humanitarian organisation that does not pledge allegiance to any political party or group. Its founding statement of principles defines its operations under Protocol 1 (Article 61) of the Geneva Conventions (1949) as being to protect the civilian population, to speed recovery and to provide for the conditions necessary for survival.

It is said that when the bombs rain down, the White Helmets rush in. Indeed, the vast majority of Syria Civil Defence volunteers have been trained in search and rescue, and are on the ground soon after a bombing to pull people out of collapsed buildings, at great personal risk. They are not deterred by an ugly and increasingly used tactic of war — which is to bomb the same area twice within an hour to kill those involved in rescuing the injured. Following this, they provide medical services, administer first aid, rush the injured to relative safety, and engage in fire-fighting. Other volunteers teach children and adults on safety measures to take during aerial attacks, support in the provision of medical services to nearly 7 million people in the areas in which they operate, and manage the evacuation of the civilian population from areas into which fighting is encroaching. Yet others work on rebuilding bridges and reconnecting public electricity and water supplies. More than a hundred brave volunteers have lost their lives whilst attempting to save the lives of others.



## To save one life is to save all of humanity

In 2014, leaders of all units of Syria Civil Defence came together and wrote their articles of association. Their work is guided by the inherent dignity of human life, and they have adopted a motto drawn from a verse in the Quran that states: “to save one life is to save all of humanity”. The volunteers save people on all sides of the conflict and pledge commitment to the principles of humanity, solidarity and impartiality.

In October 2014, Syria Civil Defence elected Raed al Salah, born in 1983, as Director. There is a small, professional national executive staff that runs the operational and administrative affairs of the organisation from the Syria Civil Defence headquarters in Sarmada, Syria and a support office in Gaziantep, Turkey. At present, Syria Civil Defence is not permitted to operate in government-controlled areas of Syria. While they are mainly present in areas controlled by the opposition, they have also operated in certain areas in Syria held by the so-called Islamic State without compromising on their principles. Their vision is to work everywhere in Syria.

The first women’s teams of Syria Civil Defence volunteers were formed in October 2014. Often, in Syria’s most conservative communities, they are the only hope for women or girls who are trapped under the rubble to be rescued. Today, these teams have earned the trust of their communities, in which they now play an indispensable part.

## The human tragedy of the Syrian civil war

Against the backdrop of unprecedented and unspeakable violence against civilians, Syria Civil Defence’s humanitarian work and deep commitment to humanity provides a beacon of hope and demonstrates civilian solidarity and courage.

The White Helmets represent ordinary Syrians who want peace and security. Their work has drawn desperately-needed attention to the plight of civilians, including many children, caught up in the fighting and living in residential areas where barrel bombs and mortars fall indiscriminately on their homes.

Syria Civil Defence has repeatedly called on the United Nations to take immediate measures to protect Syrian civilians, through the imposition of a ‘no-fly zone’ under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, if necessary. Additionally, it has repeatedly raised the alarm over deliberate targeting of civilians at the United Nations and other international fora.

When peace takes root in Syria, Syria Civil Defence is expected to assume a key role in the generational task of rebuilding their country for which they have all the skills, tools and community support.