

**Testimony before the Lantos Human Rights Commission
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Thank you to the Lantos Human Rights Commission for holding this hearing and, above all, for believing that there are solutions to civilian protection in Syria if only we would seek them out and listen to this population under siege.

Those of us who work on war can without realizing it default to talking about civilians as a monolithic group of inert and helpless victims. I would say this goes for military personnel, policymakers in national capitals, or indeed even as human rights advocates. I am guilty of it myself. It's no wonder. This conflict grows more complex by the day, with so many factors to consider – Assad's fight against his people, proxy states, the fight against ISIL, Russian participation, numerous militias, ceasefires and aid blockages, and the humanitarian crisis resulting from all of it.

So let us remind ourselves today that civilians caught in conflict are individuals with an inherent agency and dignity all their own. This is certainly true in Syria, where Syrian civilians now living through year five of a brutal war have developed some of the most creative and brave solutions toward their own protection. For as much as the international community has abandoned them, Syrian civilians have helped each other survive.

There are so many ways that ordinary Syrians try to stay alive through the Russian and Syrian bombs directly targeting them, the snipers, the extremists, illness, psychological trauma, and starvation.

Today I'll walk through three strategies Syrian civilians are using to keep themselves safe. (By "safe" I mean only that they may have an extra minute to shelter from an incoming bomb or that seeing a doctor may be possible instead of entirely out of the question. This is not true safety by any stretch of the imagination.) Their strategies include early warning systems for attacks from the air, putting schools and medical centers out of range of bombs including underground, and creating local rescue teams who act as emergency medical personnel and keep people away from the mines that make the simple act of walking their own streets deadly. I am biased in offering these three strategies, as they are ones I believe the United States should support.

My analysis comes from the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), an organization solely dedicated to civilian protection. CIVIC teams recently went to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria to look into this question of what Syrians are doing to protect themselves, and importantly, what donor nations like the United States can do to support them. I'll be supplementing that with

recommendations from the Stimson Center on how to support civilian self-protection programming, including what not to do.

The first self-protection strategy to discuss is that of early warning systems.

Civilians need time to seek shelter from air bombardment. During bombings, most of us would take cover on a ground floor or retreat behind any nearby object. Not surprisingly, that's what Syrians do too. How do they know that a bomb is on the inbound? A man from the Idlib countryside said: "Most of the time, we just use our ears. If you are under the barrels, you do not hear it because of the buzz. But from further away you can hear. The sound is the same for the dropping barrel and the MiG diving down. If you hear the sound, it is far from you. If you do not, it is about to fall on you."

Ears obviously aren't enough. Some Syrians have purchased expensive walkie-talkies (up to \$400) to receive warnings or intercept Syrian or Russian military communiqués on impending airstrikes. Spotter networks are made up of people who watch the skies day and night and then broadcast warnings of military attacks via those walkie-talkies, Facebook groups, and phone applications. Sometimes, spotters can eavesdrop on Syrian or Russian military communications, and then scramble to find Russian speakers to interpret what they hear. Local radio stations and informal communication networks can also warn of an impending attack. Syrian journalists are risking their lives to report both to their communities and to the world what is happening minute by minute.

Information like this can provide mere seconds to a few minutes of advance notice for civilians, and every moment is precious. I spoke this morning to the director of an early warning system operating in Idlib. Within 24 hours of the program's launch earlier this year, a Syrian man called to say that the system saved his family. That one story alone is worth the effort, but of course the reality is more complicated. Even with early warnings, civilians will die. The air bombardment is just too intense in Syria and even the best warning systems get overloaded with traffic – what they call "white noise" – or civilians simply can't shelter in time.

Saving lives in the literal sense, though, isn't the only benefit to an early warning system. Trauma caused by fear will be one of the biggest impediments to Syrians going back to any semblance of a normal life after the conflict and rebuilding their nation. This is especially true for Syria's children who have known little but fear of death. Early warnings give civilians some peace of mind. In a conflict of this magnitude, the slightest bit of calm is a blessing. They can farm their fields, visit relatives, and live their lives instead of constantly looking to those dreaded skies.

But even if a warning is given, where should they go?

The second strategy Syrians developed is to design and built their own structures where they can be relatively safe. That's especially important in or near places regularly being targeted (against international law) like schools and planes by the Syrian planes. Indeed, schools and hospitals have become some of the most dangerous places to be a civilian.

To protect these sites and the people they house, some towns have built air-raid shelters near schools or moved their schools underground. Hospital basements are innovatively being turned into centers for in-patients and operating theaters. Several medical facilities have been built in caves as natural protection against airstrikes (though at least one cave hospital near Aleppo was destroyed when the regime dropped a barrel bomb on it). Other towns have built smaller medical points around the country to disperse the danger and make up for the loss of the main hospitals. These smaller clinics are critical to civilian survival. Consider that a young man from Homs who was shot in the back by Syrian soldiers had to endure 21 hours to get through checkpoints to Turkey for care. Sometimes checkpoints are erected every 100 or 200 meters. For an injured person, getting to a doctor nearby and without interference from armed actors is a life or death matter.

Finally, we come to the third self-protection strategy. Knowing that nobody else can or will come to rescue them (though I know many of us would like to), Syrian civilians have banded together to rescue their own communities. The group known best for these rescue efforts is the Syrian Civil Defense or the “White Helmets.” They’re rightly nominated this year for a Nobel Peace Prize for their work to sift through rubble to find civilians, dispose of unexploded ordnance, and carry the injured away from dangerous places.

A Syrian civilian told CIVIC, “They [Russian airstrikes] are targeting the town of Salma like crazy with everything. Most of the victims are civilians. Between two and five in the morning there were many Russian airstrikes in areas that were 99 percent civilian. The Civil Defense help a lot. At three in the morning they came right away to help the wounded. They are ready 24 hours a day. If they hear any news from walkie-talkies, they come directly to rescue people.” To Syrians and to so many of us, the White Helmets are heroes.

Other lesser-known groups are providing triage, fire-fighting, and rubble removal. They also educate their communities on risk and how to keep safe from dangers like unexploded ordnance. In fact, over 70 percent of civilians interviewed by CIVIC considered unexploded ordnance to be a major concern and half knew of someone who had been killed or critically injured by them. In most conflicts, a large scale effort to demine begins when the territory is safe enough for experts to come in. But Syrians need – and are searching for – ways to address the problem now.

It’s clear that these groups take huge risks. Many White Helmets have lost their lives going in after an air strike and getting hit by a “double tap”, when Syrian forces come back overhead to kill the helpers. Over 100 White Helmets have died and more than four times that have been seriously injured. Yet they report having saved well over 40,000 lives as of the end of 2015. If that’s not a metric any donor should be proud of, I don’t know what is. And it further puts to shame all the nations voicing concern for Syrian civilians who have done little to help them.

Let’s keep in mind that the United Nations Security Council has adopted seven UN resolutions related to the Syrian government’s treatment of its own people. Russian and Syrian planes are bombing civilians on purpose. They are bombing hospitals and schools. They are stopping aid from entering civilian populated cities, and making many places in Syria inaccessible to humanitarians who want to and could help civilians.

Unless the international community – including the United States and its partners – are willing to protect civilians against Russian and Syrian attacks, it's time to consider at the very least surging support to civilians themselves who are already bravely protecting their families and neighbors. Said simply, the United States should be investing more in Syrian civilians.

For early warning systems, US investment could help make these systems more reliable and accurate. Financial support would help developers pair existing networks with enhanced technology to create a more dependable early warning system. Civilians on the ground would have more time to take shelter and a more accurate idea of where an attack will take place.

This support will save lives.

For schools and hospitals, funding and materials are needed to build, reinforce, and renovate underground schools, hospitals, and clinics. Syrian health professionals who've fled the country are eager to return and need safer places to do their life-saving work. Funding could also help build additional smaller and more widespread medical points for victims of shelling and aerial bombardment, plus clinics to receive people with non-war medical issues. For the underground spaces now being used for medical care, financing would improve the lighting, heating, and electricity doctors need to work.

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For local responders and crisis groups, the White Helmets are now being trained to dispose of mines themselves, but certainly they and other groups need more resources to safely do this and to mark off unsafe areas. Civilians also need more guidance on how to avoid mines. With more support, local groups can disseminate information about these dangers to civilians at schools, mosques, and other public spaces. One of the more urgent needs for local protection groups is more equipment such as fire trucks, ambulances, and 4x4 pickup trucks since Syrian and Russian forces destroy this equipment on a regular basis.

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The importance of civilian self-protection is beginning to be recognized in the international community. The UN Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support now have guidelines that acknowledge the value of 'the mechanisms locals have established to ensure their own protection', and are encouraging peacekeepers to complement what civilians have already created for themselves in trying to ensure protection. Some militaries, including the US armed forces, try to avoid undermining existing self-protection mechanisms. And donor nations are beginning to see the value in supporting civilian self-protection, though they should never see this as a solution to real protection from the state nor as a solution to the conflict itself.

Money cannot simply be thrown at civilians in the hopes that protection will appear. A donor like the United States needs to understand how civilians organizing to protect themselves see their own safety and what they want to improve. Certainly, civilians should not be told what to do but rather supported in what *they* want to do. For a donor, this means surrendering a significant degree of control over activities and funds, and knowing that recipients cannot always

be perfectly vetted. This is hard for US agencies to stomach, but it's a reality if we're going to support civilians to stay alive.

The Department of State and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), along with their NGO partners, are the obvious places to go for expertise in supporting local initiatives with US dollars. And an obvious place to start on the ground is by supporting *existing* self-protection mechanisms developed by civilians themselves. Working this way can improve a strategy's chances of success because civilians already trust it, and it's likely that the strategy has been tried and tested for any negative side effects (e.g. the early warning system exposes a local radio station to the regime) and for effectiveness.

Syrians – unless and until policies change – are on their own. There is no single, specific entity tasked with their physical protection from bombardment, to reinforce their hospitals, build safety points, develop early warning systems, or create evacuation plans.

America can help. So many civilians have been killed. It is too late for us to help them, but it is not too late for us to help the Syrians who remain.