

**The Global Strategy Network (TGSN)** leads a Consortium with over six years of experience delivering high-impact strategic communications and social cohesion programmes on behalf of the UK and US governments across Syria, including the Northeast and Northwest. We are joined in our consortium by **Proximity International**, a women-owned and women-led organisation that has managed and delivered a wide range of research and third-party monitoring and evaluation (M&E) projects in fragile and highly insecure locations on behalf of the UK and other international donor governments and organisations, including most recently with TGSN on the CSSF-funded Pathways to Peace and Social Cohesion scoping study in Northeast Syria.

The Consortium also brings together a network of partnerships in both the CSO and media space: CSOs are **Rethink, Rebuild Society, The Syrian Platform for Peace, Syria Solidarity** and **We Exist! Coalition** in the UK, and **Impact (Citizens for Syria), Taakad (Verify), Al-Idlibi House** in Syria. TGSN's longstanding work in the Syrian media space with our own flagship platforms SY24 and SY+ maintains close collaboration with **two dozen other Syrian media partners**, on whom further detailed information is provided in **Section 1.6**.

TGSN has, for several months, been working closely with the European Institute for Peace (EIP) and the Autonomous Administration of North Eastern Syria (AANES) on how to deal with the tens of thousands of inhabitants of Al Hol and Al Roj, including the reintegration of Syrians back into Syrian communities, Iraqis back into Iraq and the eventual relocation of foreigners. Through strong relationships built in NE Syria from this work, **TGSN is able to access current inhabitants and prisoners in these and other AANES-controlled camps** – including former Daesh members from both Syria and abroad. Combined with this project, this access provides an invaluable resource for identifying former Daesh fighters able to talk back to the communities from which they came and dispel Daesh-driven myths about the realities of the Caliphate and propose worthwhile alternatives to achieving the change that so many Daesh supporters sought. Furthermore, while a secondary objective of this programme is preparing communities for the reintegration of people from these camps, TGSN will uniquely be able to ensure that communications to host communities accurately reflects the issues and concerns of those being reintegrated and vice versa.

Our core team will be supported by a Senior Advisory Panel that includes internationally recognised authorities on Daesh, HTS, al-Qaeda and the threats of violent extremism (such as Dr Fatima Akilu, Richard Barrett CMG OBE, Dr Elisabeth Kendall, and Dr Feriha Peracha) as well as proven approaches to combating the drivers of radicalisation such as psychosocial support and youth engagement. Our collective expertise spans counter violent extremism (CVE), research and analysis, advocacy, psychosocial support, strategic media and communications, content development and sustainable capacity building, with demonstrable experience of delivering over 30 targeted CVE and Strategic Communications campaigns across the Middle East, Africa and the Indian sub-continent, including in Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Somalia, Northeast Nigeria and the Swat Valley of Pakistan (see **Section 1.9**).

**The Objective:** to undermine Daesh, HTS and AQ-S ideology, brand, propaganda and global influence whilst increasing knowledge and uptake of alternative pathways away from radicalisation in order to increase resilience against violent extremist narratives amongst vulnerable male and female Syrians primarily aged 16-30 in Syria and the UK.

**Our Solution:** we have designed a campaign that is specifically *not* linear, but iterative, adaptive and rooted in our in-depth understanding of the operating environment built from recent Syria research on CVE (Pathways to Peace), US and UK-funded strat-comms project (US DOS), innovative use of technology, and existing networks, partnerships and Syria-facing media platforms. This project has four workstreams:

- **Workstream 1: Research, Assessment, Programming Iteration and Deployment (RAPID)** based on target audience (TA) analysis and understanding.
- **Workstream 2: Networked Communication Campaigns** to undermine Daesh, HTS, AQ-S brands and promote TA resilience through rejection of VEOs and the embrace of alternative pathways.
- **Workstream 3: Resilience-building activities through Community Hubs** and volunteer networks to promote engagement.
- **Workstream 4: Capacity Building of partner CSOs** to help monitor impact & promote sustainability.

Bringing significant added value to our proposal, we are in a position to start delivering multiple strands of activity from **Day 1** of contract award because of TGSN's existing media platforms and partnerships in Syria, and real-time monitoring of Daesh propaganda output.

**Workstream 1: Research, Assessment, Programming Iteration and Deployment (RAPID).** This workstream will both support HMG's understanding and inform the iterative design and delivery of the other workstreams on this project, ensuring it remains agile and able to be tactically reactive and strategically proactive. On-the-ground reporting, analysis of Daesh, HTS and HAD comms, and Social Listening will feed into fortnightly reporting that inform programming themes and enable the project to react more quickly to changing events than our adversaries – getting 'inside' their communications OODA (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) loop.

**On-the-ground reporting** is enabled by TGSN's network of stringers across Northwest and Northeast Syria and Proximity's trained field teams. These stringers are in and from the communities in which they operate and have been trained by TGSN over several years in journalistic skills that support the collection of rigorously sourced data to create engaging content for defined target audiences.

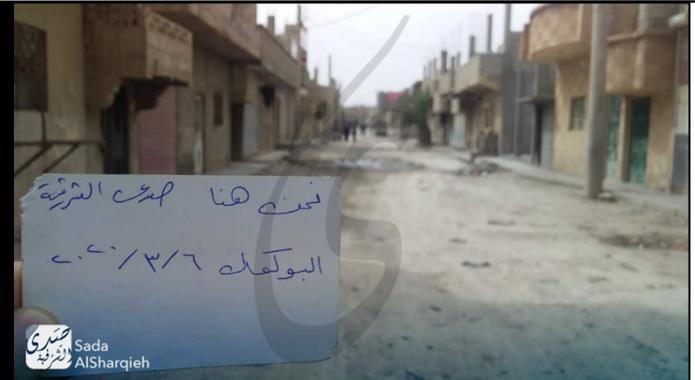
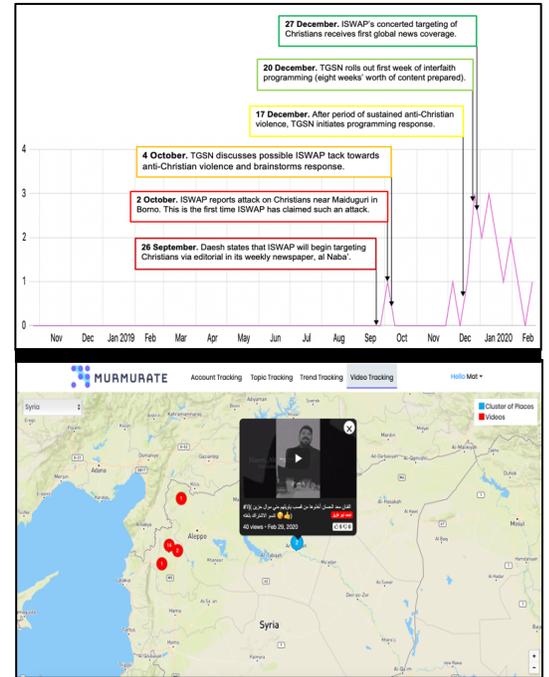
**Analysis of Daesh, HTS and AQ-S communications** is provided through TGSN's 'Daeshboard'. This draws on TGSN's historical and ongoing access to VEO closed communication groups on Telegram and Rocket.Chat and comprises tens of thousands of pieces of VEO propaganda published since 2014. By tracking both VEO claims and how their themes change over time and geographically, TGSN is able to identify

emerging trends and how to stifle them. An example of this can be seen in how TGSN was able to adapt its counter-VEO strategic communication delivery in Northeast Nigeria on a weekly basis according to trends identified through Daeshboard’s Comms and Conflict Trackers. In Sept 2019, Daesh’s propaganda hinted that ISWAP’s new targeting priority in the BAY states would be Christians. Cross-referencing our live datastreams on Daesh’s global rhetoric and local actions, we determined that this was not just an aspirational statement months before Daesh began publishing videos of ISWAP militants executing Christians in December 2019. Not only did Daeshboard enable TGSN to identify and visualise *how* this threat was taking shape, it meant we could identify *where* it was being implemented most immediately, thereby allowing us to modify our programming priorities (both thematic and geographic). In this instance, the project was able to establish a concerted line of effort promoting religious tolerance through both radio broadcasting and community activities while ISWAP’s new policy was still embryonic, thereby getting ahead of its efforts to provoke sectarian conflict. TGSN has the same ability to do this in Syria.

Additionally, the project will deploy its own **Social Listening** software, Murmurate, to monitor how public conversations differ geographically between NW and NE Syria, and within the UK TA; how people are reacting to VEO activity in Syria, and equally importantly, how they are reacting to local governance and early recovery efforts. TGSN’s social listening software is unique in that it enables the user to view conversations geographically and applies current network science to map how digital audiences are connected to each other – a key component of resilience being the availability of support networks locally and online.

**Workstream 2: Media Campaigns.** TGSN has three in-house, Syria-focussed media brands with over one million followers across Syria and the UK. SY24 and SY+ produce content in both English and Arabic, covering all of Syria but with a particular focus on the Northwest. The huge global coverage that the SY platforms are able to generate (including campaigns seen by many hundreds of millions of people and attracting commend as far as the UN Security Council, such as that in the viral image shown) has garnered the brand strong credibility and a big following amongst Syrians both in Syria and abroad. As one of the largest of very few outlets covering the humanitarian disasters in Idlib on a daily basis, the SY channels are powerful moderate platforms that are able to prevent extremist platforms from interpreting and presenting the humanitarian tragedies or military developments in Idlib within their own narratives and without challenge. Similarly, TGSN has a separate, distinct platform, Sada Al Sharqiyeh (Echo of the East), that focuses on the Northeast. With 170k followers in NE Syria, this platform provides another effective mechanism to engage the Northeast directly and contest local extremist narratives by speaking directly to the distinct concerns of that area – which differ from NW. Feeding these brands is a network of stringers whom TGSN has both trained and provided with the necessary equipment including cameras and video editing software. This includes a team of female journalists who provide about 40% of all SY content (see CCS-W below). These stringers and media platforms do not, however, operate in isolation but are part of a broad ‘network of networks’ that enables us to drive stories into the mainstream or closer to the TA

Daeshboard and Murmurate



We are interested in effective messaging rather than building our own proprietary media capabilities. This involves active partnerships and coordination with two dozen different media organisations (additional detail available in 1.6) with a collective monthly reach in the tens of millions, and, more importantly, to large numbers of the presumed TA. Significantly, the SY platforms were first established with CSSF funding from the ‘Syrian Voices’ project which ended in March 2019; TGSN has continued to mentor their administrators and moderators (and provide funding) with the result that they now occupy a sufficiently prominent role in the media landscape that we are in the process of spinning them off as independent, self-sustaining, Syrian-owned and Syrian-run media entities. When TGSN is engaged in appropriate new projects, SY platforms will act as local partners, but they will also be eligible to bid for funding of new activities on their own. This is an example of both this project’s and TGSN’s core goal of creating sustainability and legacy beyond programmatic lifetimes.

For this project, the Consortium will have two long-running strategic lines of messaging along with more reactive, tactical messaging that will be deployed rapidly and informed by Workstream 3. The strategic and long-running campaigns will focus on: **pro-social stories** split across three sub-themes of humanitarian activism, political agency, women empowerment and community reconciliation; and coverage of **Early Recovery** in NE Syria, with a focus on showing socio-economic normality, thus demonstrating practical and effective alternatives to VEO 'solutions' for the Syrian crisis. TGSN has a strong track record of covering such activities, and our content has been well received not only locally, but by prominent figures including the former Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition, Brett McGurk (via Twitter).

More reactive tactical messaging will be informed by Workstream 1 and rolled out using TGSN's RAPID methodology. An example of this approach is detailed above where TGSN was able to identify an emerging trend of ISWAP targeting Christians in Nigeria and rapidly rollout an interfaith tolerance campaign on both radio and through community activity.

**Workstream 3: Community Hubs & Volunteer Network.** Branded as the Centre for Communications & Services (CCS) and closely aligned with our SY media brands, TGSN runs staffed offices in Idlib, Azaz, Deir Ezzour and al-Raqqa, and through its UK partners, Rethink, Rebuild Society, The Syrian Platform for Peace, Syria Solidarity and We Exist! in London and Manchester. These will serve as hubs for activity in both Syria and the UK that build resilience of the TA to VEO messaging. Activities will seek to build the resilience of participants by aligning with the four pillars outlined by the British Council: **Confidence, Social Support, Purposefulness and Adaptability**. Some activities may address only one pillar, while others will be cross-cutting. Due to the operating environment in Syria, and particularly in Idlib, these activities will have to be designed and delivered with the greatest sensitivity in order that they are accepted by the communities and local security and governance actors. In Idlib, TGSN has already established CCS-W a centre dedicated to training women journalists who now produce content for SY; particularly by accessing stories that male journalists cannot, CCS-W brings to light and into public debate issues such as women empowerment in NW Syria and the treatment of current and former female detainees that demonstrate the misalignment of VEO practices with Syrian values. This initiative has been slowly and carefully built over three years and while such content stimulates online debate, the very activity of credible and popular female journalism itself stands in relief to VEO attitudes on gender. The Consortium would draw on those experiences to design gender sensitive activity rollout. While well aware of the important role that men can play in promoting gender equality, we would anticipate this including days and events that are 'women only' in order to encourage and enable their involvement in more traditional and conservative communities. Initial activities would include:

**CCS-UK:** Our UK partners, starting in London and Manchester and expanding thereafter, will hold regular events whereby Syrians in the UK (as well as non-Syrians who are keen to support) are linked up with our CCS hubs in Syria (A'zaz, Afrin, Raqqa, Sarmada & Atarib) and wider SY networks across NES and NWS. These events would allow those in the UK to engage with local Syrian activists in organic ways, be it skills training, taking part in campaigns, generating assistance, provision of goods, social interaction, moral and practical support, etc. Past SY videos have prompted real-world actions, including the provision of a wheelchair to a disabled child, a prosthetic limb to an injured woman, financial donations and even (as part of TGSN's #SolidarityWithKareem campaign) the evacuation of a child from Eastern Ghouta at the request of the President of Turkey. These centres would harness such energy, creating links between UK and Syrian activists and identifying ways in which both can focus their energy and grow support networks in mutually reinforcing and positive ways, and away from the activities pushed by VEOs. Other activities might include showing football tournaments and more specifically cultural activities to Syrian gatherings in both UK and Syria, with screens alongside one another that show both audiences so they can share the experience. However, these activities would chiefly be driven by Syrians involved in both Syria and UK rather than TGSN; we would facilitate and ensure that all activities meet the project's objectives and are both gender and conflict sensitive.

**Extending the reach of the hubs:** TGSN has helped found a network of volunteers across Northeast and Northwest Syria called Halamna (Our Dream) which the Consortium would help extend the work and reach of the community hubs into rural areas and IDP camps. This approach will extend the reach of hub-based identity- and resilience-building activities, building a sense of belonging and community, and thereby fostering the emergence of a linked regional resilience network that has direct access to the remaining Syria-based TAs. This approach will build on TGSN and Halamna's existing access to expand into new activities and areas and iteratively build resilience and community identity. Initial activities will include:

**Computer literacy (Syria):** Cross-cutting the pillars of resilience and supporting the pursuit of economic pathways, basic computer skills and literacy have proven themselves to be of huge importance. TGSN has already run such IT workshops in Idlib. One female attendee in 2019, having become a widower due to the conflict, was struggling to find a path to economic viability despite a clear aptitude and enthusiasm. The stumbling block, she was frequently told, was her lack of work experience and basic skills needed for an entry level position. After joining TGSN's in-country programme to train women in computer literacy and journalism skills, she now has a full-time position with a well-known Syrian TV station. Again, CCS-UK events could also support such activities remotely.



**Sporting Events:** Sport has a strong body of evidence to support its positive effects on reducing violent extremism and fostering an individual's **Confidence, Social Support, Purposefulness and Adaptability**.<sup>1</sup> TGSN has already held football tournaments in northwest Syria that brought together a wide variety of local stakeholders and actors and have been broadcast by Al Jazeera. The Consortium would replicate this type of activity in both NE Syria and NW Syria along with other sporting opportunities, taking into account the rapidly changeable security situation, and the need for gender inclusion.

**Mobile cinema:** TV, unsurprisingly, remains extremely popular in Syria, yet particularly outside of urban areas, access remains limited. We will take a projector and screen to create cinema viewings in IDP camps and rural areas. The selected films would focus on pro-social cartoons for children, films chosen with regard to conflict sensitivity and gender, and popular football events to drive participation.

**Community plays:** TGSN has recent successful experience elsewhere of designing and delivering resilience-building community activities, including community plays. A number of themes will be identified at the start of the project to act as long-running storylines, while at the same time the Consortium would use TGSN's RAPID approach to programming to remain flexible and adapt its activities depending on the activities and messages being propagated by VEOs and identified in Workstream 1, as well as on the feedback received from TAs.

**Workstream 4: Capacity Building.** This will build the capacity of our Syria- or UK-based CSOs, helping them to craft campaigns with clear and effective communications components that ensure VEO narratives about Syria are not the only ones our TAs hear. Using TGSN's network of trainers across Northwest and Northeast Syria, along with TGSN's UK-based trainers and CCS-UK, the Consortium will design and deliver a robust chain of training that will:

- ▶ Empower these CSOs to be powerful digital publishers through iterative training on topics such as Search Engine Optimisation, Keyword Advertising, Social Listening, and Audience Segmentation.
- ▶ Improve the storytelling skills of the UK CSOs by training them on the use of GCS's OASIS model as a campaign planning tool – enabling them to craft compelling content that stands in opposition to the Syria story VEOs are trying to tell.
- ▶ Provide a framework for UK CSOs to monitor and evaluate their own communication campaigns, including the free provision of TGSN's Murmurate system to the CSOs for the duration of the project.
- ▶ Enable CSOs in the UK and Syria to better recognise and deal with disinformation by using the Government Communication Service's RESIST model – and TGSN's Arabic language version that has been adapted specifically for Syria.

**Pre-production, production, testing, delivery, dissemination and amplification, both on and offline |** For the long-running pro-social and early recovery stories, pre-production story sourcing will be driven primarily by the stringers inside Syria up to the production hub. The reactive messaging will be driven by Workstream 1 informing the production hub who will then design suitable stories. Production itself happens in Istanbul, Gaziantep and within Syria where TGSN maintains professional Syrian video editors, script writers, graphic designers and news editors. Testing will take two main forms: short- and long-term. Short-term, we will conduct A/B testing of products where we will alter the length and style of our products to see which performs the best, taking the best each time and iterating while recording the learnings. Long-term, we will conduct Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews as part of our MEL process. Offline, content will be distributed through our community hubs and outreach network in Syria and through our local partners in the UK. Online, it will be distributed through *websites, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and WhatsApp* (where in-app watching of *YouTube* videos allows collection of additional metrics) and satellite TV. In addition, several members of TGSN's staff are key influencers in their own right, appearing several times per week on TV channels such as *Syria TV, Orient, Al Jazeera, and BBC Arabic*. Current positioning offers two key benefits regarding audience expansion: i) given TGSN's pre-existing stringer relationship with major TV channels, we can place video footage at no cost; and ii) appearances on these channels and existing platforms draw attention to project content and campaigns. SY+ will serve as the main platform for diaspora-focused content – almost half of its followers are located in the UK and Europe, and it has a proven record of engaging these audiences. Additionally, nearly half of SY+ followers are women, a remarkably high ratio for Syria-focused platforms.

**Credibility of messaging.** Syrians with long experience of running communication campaigns in Syria will produce and disseminate messaging to provide maximum credibility, cultural nuances, narrative, language and effectiveness. Our in-country leads will also be responsible for oversight of this process. We have also incorporated message-testing opportunities through our iterative process which will allow us continually to refine our messaging throughout the course of the programme. From the start, we would access existing cultural concepts, networks and narratives rather than create artificial or contrived new messaging and pathways.

**Mitigating the risk of association with regional or Western governments.** No content will be publicly linked to the Cell or its constituent governments, and local partners will not have access to that information. We will discuss and agree with the Cell media lines we and our local partners will take in the unlikely event that this information is made public. In general, any new project with funding raises suspicions of association with a regional or Western government, but if the content is seen as valuable to the community (because it resonates and/or is entertaining and useful) people will remain receptive. Not only does TGSN have several years of experience in managing this risk, our plan to spin off SY as an independent entity also greatly reduces it. Furthermore, our approach of fostering organic, networked relationships, both between UK CSOs and CCS and also with multiple Syrian media partners, mitigates this risk further.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/dohadecaration/en/news/2019/12/engaging-young-people-in-sports-programmes-can-help-reduce-violent-extremism.html>