



Karim

After fleeing Damascus, first for Antakya and then to Istanbul after ISIS threatened him, Karim cobbled together a living from fixing gigs. Orhan had connected him with his first reporters, and Karim continued to subfix for Orhan on occasion. He also began to recruit clients of his own. Karim knew from his luxury hotel days how to hang out with foreigners, how to play the coolly exotic Syrian and not the desperate or aggressive one, and proved entrepreneurial in using journalist parties to meet potential clients and reduce his dependence on Orhan.

Everything Karim worked on, his specialist beat, focused on the fallout from the Syrian civil war. But what he did and how presented himself changed dramatically from story to story and as time went on.

For one early story Karim did with the German TV channel DDT, his correspondent posed as a museum curator interested in buying stolen artifacts looted from Syria. Karim played the part of a go-between (a fixer in the early twentieth-century sense) with an antiquities smuggler and arranged a meeting. DDT equipped Karim with a hidden camera and pushed him to convince the smuggler to show off as much merchandise as possible and to state the provenance of his wares on video.

Karim's affiliation with journalism was something to hide from sources who wanted to avoid public awareness but something to highlight for those who sought such attention. When Karim talked with Syrian revolutionaries and activists eager to win international sympathy, he was sure to lead with the name of the outlet employing him and a sentence about its wide impact.

Activists spanning the spectrum from diaspora social media devotees to official NGO representatives to public relations firms also fix.¹

¹ See Powers (2018) and Wright (2018) on the way NGOs increasingly shape journalistic coverage of their issues and even directly produce and distribute media that circumvents traditional news outlets.

Meta-fixers and reporters turn to them for access, though activists' editorial input can be a threat to objectivity. Activists are by definition biased advocates for particular causes. They try to win journalists over and to use the news to broadcast and add authority to their perspectives. The journalist–activist relationship is marked by both mutual distrust and mutual reliance (Breindl 2016).

One of a fixer's **sensemaking** duties is to help reporters vet activists. They explain to their clients how and to what degree an activist is biased toward this or that cause, providing the reporter a guide to interpret the activist's input and avoid naïve acceptance of their sloganeering. At the same time, one of a fixer's **access** duties is to help activists vet reporters. An activist must be convinced that a reporter is receptive to their message and works for an influential enough outlet to be worth the activist's time (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013).

In mid-2014, Geert read an American news article about Syrian Civil Defense, a volunteer emergency response organization operating in rebel-held areas of Syria. Syrian Civil Defense had recently rebranded as the White Helmets and set up a fundraising site with the help of a newly founded UK-based publicity/activist organization called the Syria Campaign. Nobody in the Belgian press had yet covered the White Helmets and Geert's editor at the newspaper *Het Nieuws* was excited at the story idea.

Geert asked Orhan to connect him to a team of search-and-rescue workers. Orhan in turn reached out to Karim, who despite his own revolutionary activist background did not know anyone involved with the organization. Fortunately, emailing the Syria Campaign contact email listed at the bottom of the White Helmets website worked. After vetting Karim and Geert (Orhan had stepped aside after catalyzing the project by recruiting Karim), the Syria Campaign put them in touch with volunteer emergency workers in northern Syria.

"[Geert] just said, I want to do something about the White Helmets ... I didn't have any contacts; I didn't have anything," Karim later remembered.

I just had a Syrian name and Arabic and like [*Het Nieuws*] behind me, and so I think – I mean not that Syrians know what [*Het Nieuws*] is, so I guess that didn't really help. But when they would type [*Het Nieuws* into a search engine], something would pop up, so I think that really helps when you're starting out, as opposed to being like a freelance journalist or fixer. ... Like,

it's hard to convince people to talk to you. 'Cause they feel so tired sometimes. They're like, "What is this going to do for me?"

Not only fatigue but suspicion can affect sources' and activists' willingness to contribute to news stories. The White Helmets and Syrian Campaign would soon face a well-organized Russian and Syrian government disinformation campaign claiming that they fabricated documentation of war crimes and supported radical Islamist rebels (Levinger 2018). In this case, though, the sources were happy to talk once they learned that Geert could help them reach a new national audience, given that they were on a fundraising campaign seeking support from European governments.

Karim arranged and translated a Skype teleconference call with a couple of White Helmet volunteers, sitting beside Geert in the latter's apartment. The interviewees wanted to talk big picture politics, but Geert steered them instead toward personal accounts of racing to the scene of explosions and searching for survivors beneath rubble. Geert asserted **frame control** by choosing to focus on these personal experiences rather than on political slogans or lists of the Syrian government's human rights violations.

Geert had to depend on those activists for access to information from inside Syria. To fully adopt their sensemaking, though, to hand over control of the story's overall frame to them and focus on Assad government war crimes and the righteousness of the rebel cause, would have offended Geert's sense of professional autonomy. The compromise that satisfied both the activists and the reporter was the personalization of the story.

The story still aligned with the White Helmets' and Syria Campaign's politics as far as who figured as a hero and who as a villain. After all, it was the Syrian government bombing and shelling the civilians whom the White Helmets were rescuing or unearthing.

When journalists talk and teach about their craft, they tend to stress the literary and empathy-provoking benefits of personal stories. They may be right about the power of focusing audiences in on individuals rather than discussing political or cultural conflicts in more abstract terms. Yet personalization can also be journalists' compromise with the competing aims of activists and sources, a compromise that protects the author's status within journalism from accusations of co-optation. Savvy activists and publicists play along with this

personalization because it allows them to claim that they are not shoving their political agenda down journalists' throats, thus earning them greater trust among, and access to, media outlets that they need to reach a wide audience.

To rise in status within journalism, informal recognition among insider peers is key, as when Burcu went from "local staff" to "Turkey producer" in her foreign colleagues' eyes. But even nominal labels that insiders informally refuse to recognize can convince outsiders such as state authorities of a news contributor's professional legitimacy.

After a few months and stories for DDT on migrant smuggling and Germans in Syria, the channel offered Karim a full-time producer contract. For the TV channel, the contract was foremost an exclusivity deal, a way to keep Karim to themselves and away from competitors. Karim may have been a "bureau producer" on paper, but they went on referring to him as their fixer.

Karim readily accepted their offer, the stable income, and the press card that they helped him obtain. Even if he was in practice considered a fixer, Karim found that his official status and especially his new press card helped him avoid problems when traveling inside Turkey.

By this time, the Turkish government had started providing Syrians with *geçici koruma kimlik belgeleri* – temporary protection identity cards, which Syrians knew as *kimlik* – that entitled them to free healthcare and education. The problem was that each *kimlik* was location specific. If a Syrian wanted to relocate within Turkey, they had to inform authorities in advance, then re-register for another *kimlik* in their new location, a lengthy process. Sometimes Turkish officials and companies interpreted the complex and unclear rules to mean that Syrians were not entitled to travel around the country, which could create problems for fixers who needed to board a bus or a plane for work (İneli-Ciğer 2015; Baban et al. 2016; Bellamy et al. 2017). In this context, Karim's press card was valuable as official accreditation from the Turkish Prime Minister's Directorate General of Press and Information that he was producer and representative of the international media, a trump card to play when facing an intransigent gendarme at a checkpoint or sales agent at a ticket counter.

Karim had also grown pessimistic about prospects of a democratic revolution or peaceful near future in Syria. He expected to one day seek asylum in Europe or North America. Documentation of an official

position at a foreign news organization would help convince the UNHCR that he could not safely return to Syria.

In addition to refugees and smuggling, Karim's colleagues at DDT were interested in high-adrenaline trips into Syria to report from the front lines. Karim was still wary of returning to his home country, given the circumstances of his departure and threats he had faced from ISIS even within Turkey, but he assisted the German channel as a remote meta-fixer. Expanding his network from his days with revolutionary coordinating committees, Karim was able to establish working relationships with sub-fixers inside Syria and with rebel commanders to secure safe passage for the visits he coordinated from Istanbul.

Then ISIS rose from a bit player in the civil war to a nation-shattering "caliphate" larger than neighboring Jordan. The self-proclaimed Islamic State grabbed international attention while also making it more difficult for foreign reporters to themselves travel to Syria. DDT stopped sending correspondents into the country and began to rely more on content from people they called activists or citizen journalists. Karim helped organize the recruitment of Syrians inside ISIS territory, whom DDT paid thousands of euros for footage smuggled to Turkey at risk of gruesome punishment.²

² On other cases of news organizations outsourcing/subcontracting risk to local contributors, see Pendry (2011) and Seo (2019).