Avaaz Faces Questions Over Role at Center of Syrian Protest Movement

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Amid the mass of reporting and commentary around the bloody events in Syria this week, one aspect has largely gone unnoticed: the extraordinary role played by an online campaigning group that despite its infancy has managed to place itself at the centre of the unfolding crisis. **Avaaz** is only five years old, but has exploded to become the globe's largest and most powerful online activist network. In Syria, it has acted as a coordinating hub and logistical supply route for the protest movement. It was also centrally involved in the planning and co-ordination of this week's operation to evacuate four western journalists in which 13 Syrian activists died under government shelling.

The tragic loss of life, combined with Avaaz’s increasingly pivotal role in the Syrian uprising, has raised inevitable doubts about such a young organization. In particular, questions have been asked about whether an internet campaign with such a limited track record is equipped to be operating in such a brutal war zone.

The accusation of inexperience clearly irritates Ricken Patel, Avaaz's Canadian-British co-founder and director. He stresses the personal experience of Avaaz's senior team – the 20­odd war zones that Avaaz's campaigns manager previously worked in; the time served by its campaign director at the US state department and Amnesty; and his own four years in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan, Afghanistan. He believes that doubts about Avaaz's competence in war zones are the product of the traditional media's misunderstanding of what it does. “The problem is the media just doesn't get online organizing. We are getting on with the business of making a difference in the world.” Patel says, “You can raise more money online faster than any other model. You can mobilize people offline in the streets and protests faster.”

In 2007, it began as just a handful of online organizers armed with nothing but a few computers, a global ambition and a clever campaign slogan "to close the gap between the world we have and the world most people everywhere want". Since then its internet membership has soared, doubling every year to 13.5 million. Its fundraising ability has followed suit: it has raised $3m through small donations to fund activities across the Arab spring. Its political reach, too, with the world's top diplomats making a bee-line to Avaaz's door.

Initially, it was better known for its online petitions. As time has passed it has taken more and more risks, expanding both the scale and scope of what it does – from "break the blackout" campaigns in Myanmar and Tibet, to engagement with the Arab spring uprisings in Tunisia and Libya. At each stage, it has sought the approval of its own membership through online polling and fundraising campaigns. Patel says that gives Avaaz the strength to take the next big step, because as an institution it is beholden to no one but its own members and will follow their guidance wherever that leads.

Syria has certainly been risky. The group was quicker on the draw in responding to the first signs of the protest movement than most aid organizations. To begin with, Avaaz sent a team of staff organizers to Lebanon after spotting the first signs of a nascent protest movement in Syria. Contact was then made with Syrian activists inside the country. From there, Avaaz sent in hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of communications equipment – satellite phones and internet connections that gave the protesters a link to the outside world.

As with earlier Arab spring engagements in Tunisia and Libya, the protesters needed to know how to use it if they were to be effective. So Avaaz sent in trainers who could give grounding in how to use the satphones as well as basic training in citizen journalism. Reports coming from Avaaz-trained citizen journalists in Homs and other key conflict zones, channelled through the Avaaz communications hub outside the country, has been a major source of information on the uprising and the regime's bloody response, used by news outlets around the world.

Getting in the equipment involved opening up smuggling routes across the Syrian border into hotbeds such as Homs and its most badly bombed neighbourhood, Baba Amr, which led Avaaz seemlessly into the next phase of its engagement. With the smuggling routes open, it could help get $2m of blood bags, tetanus shots, respiratory machines and other medical supplies into the country, bringing relief to communities that were desperate for help and that more establishment institutions like the ICRC had failed to reach.

It has also smuggled 34 international journalists into the trouble zones. Marie Colvin, the Sunday Times journalist, entered using another conduit, but the French photographer Remi Ochlik who died with her as a result of Syrian government shelling was helped in by Avaaz. Journalists who went in with Avaaz's help have at times also needed help in escaping the violent suppression of the Syrian regime. So it was that Avaaz came to be involved in the evacuation mission of four western journalists last Sunday night. "We provided the communications hub where messages could come and be relayed between the Syrian activist networks," Patel explains. "In the course of that relaying our team gave advice. We were involved in the planning and the thinking. Think about the expertise that is needed here. You have a set of Syrian activist networks that have sustained a peaceful protest movement in the face of every horror this police state could throw at them. They know their country and how to do this better than anyone on the planet."

But does that absolve Avaaz from responsibility for what happened? “No,” Patel accepts, “I wouldn’t separate ourselves out from what happened. We were absolutely involved in the operation and we supported the co-ordination of it. We just didn't make the final decision.”

Patel says he is proud of Avaaz’s record, compared with that of more cautious international organisations. “The international community has failed to act, failed to support the Syrian people. They've been full of words and light on actions. We’ve given concrete support and assistance.” But the loss of life has still been a heavy burden. He prefers not to think about the 13 who died in the latest mission, so much as the 8,000 who have died in total as a result of the Syrian regime's bloody reprisals. “To lose so many incredible activists who our team is very close to has been very hard. We feel sadness and despair at the cruelty that is being inflicted on these people and inspiration at the staggering bravery they are demonstrating.”

Has he ever had any doubts about the fireball of energy that his creation has helped to unleash around the world? To organize a petition against News Corporation is one thing, to be involved in a life-and-death struggle in Syria another entirely. “No, not at all,” he says. “I think this has been one of our community's finest moments.”

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