

14032 A hi-tech response to the war in Syria

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In July 2012, Ahmad Haidar saw a young man die at the hands of a Syrian army sniper on an Aleppo street. The first shot had hit the civilian in the leg and onlookers felt it was a deliberate attempt to incapacitate rather than instantly kill, which is a common tactic intended to attract rescuers to target them too. Aware of this danger, the onlookers, unable to approach the victim, desperately struggled to pull him to safety using ropes and metal poles. The attempt to help was brave, but unprepared and badly equipped. Haidar thought there was something he could do to help.

Drawing on his expertise in electronics and computer programming - which he taught before the war – he devised a hi-tech response to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad’s snipers. The result: a caterpillar-tracked, remote-controlled robot equipped with large mechanical arms. It is designed to pick up wounded people, place them on a stretcher inside an armoured compartment and move them to safety.

Haidar and his childhood friend Belal, an engineer, have spent the past seven months fabricating and assembling. The robotic arms – the most complex and technically demanding component - are now complete. Next, they need a bulldozer chassis to mount them on. Acquiring one will not be easy without some form of outside help. Haidar attempted to crowdfund the project on robotena.org but so far it has not generated the money required. As a result, he and his wife, Isabelle, have exhausted their personal savings to meet the robot’s construction costs.

Haidar’s background means he has valuable skills, and before he escaped Syria, he was part of a hacker group waging electronic war against the government’s Syrian Electronic Army (SEA). In April 2012, Haidar says the group managed to upload a breaking-news banner to the state-controlled Al-Dunya TV channel reporting that Assad had decided to step down “for the good of his people”. Anti-government protesters hit the streets in celebratory response to this high-profile security breach, carrying banners that said “Thank you, Pirates of Aleppo”. The hackers adopted the name.

The pirates also regularly broke into the Facebook profiles of activists arrested by the regime and cleaned up any evidence of rebellious activities. In their place, they uploaded explicit pictures to act as a distraction. “We would swap every revolutionary flag or phrase with pornographic photos to keep the investigators busy,” Haidar says with a smile. “It worked really well.”

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