

# IMPARTIALITY

According to the Red Cross/Red Crescent, impartiality means to not discriminate based on nationality, race, religious belief, class, or political opinions. Instead, responses should be based on need. If, for example, a barrel bomb hits a building full of Christian, Sunni, and Alawite families, to be impartial a human rights documenter should interview all the victims and not focus on one group over another.

## Objectivity and Impartiality vs. Neutrality

Neutrality should not be confused with impartiality. Neutrality is about not taking sides or expressing viewpoints. For humanitarian workers, it is important to be both neutral and impartial so they can work without political interference. But human rights activists do not need to be neutral to do their jobs. For example, you can criticize the Assad government for harming civilians as long as you document violations happening against government supporters equally and fairly. It is not neutral, but it is impartial.

### How to be Impartial

- Follow human rights standards and guidelines
- Use documentation to advocate for principles, not ideologies or political positions
- Use objective language (ex: “martyr” and “fatasa” glorify one side and put down

another. They are politicized terms that show bias and decrease impartiality. Use “deceased” or “victim” instead.)

- Be reliable and accurate; lies and even small exaggerations discredit the work
- Draft a clear methodology or policy for documentation and follow it
- Corroborate documentation by collecting and comparing many different pieces of information
- Utilize diverse sources of information
- Hire staff who are impartial and come from diverse backgrounds
- Collect all types of documentation, no matter the perpetrator or victim (if you want to specialize in a certain type of documentation, be upfront and transparent)
- Be consistent – use the same language and standards in all your documentation
- Do not make legal determinations (ex: calling something a “crime against humanity” or labeling someone a “criminal” shows bias. Use “incident” and “suspect” or “actor” instead.)

## Reasons to Stay Impartial

- **Credibility and reputation** – Impartiality is a key principle internationally for human rights documentation, journalism, and even advocacy. By developing a reputation for being impartial, the documentation you collect will be more credible and your work will be taken more seriously.
- **High standards for justice**– Documentation has the potential to be used in future prosecutions or truth commissions, but only if it is impartial and objective. Courts have very high standards for accepting evidence so following best practices like impartiality could increase the future impact of your work.
- **Due process** – Fair and just judicial systems require impartiality. By describing individuals as criminals you are making a judgement before a court has been able to weigh the evidence and come to a fair determination. As members of the human rights community, due process is an important value we should all uphold in order to set a good precedent for Syria's future judicial system.
- **Working in vain** – Documentation is difficult work and can be very dangerous. By being biased, all that hard work is at risk of being dismissed and not used.
- **Upholding quality of documentation** –Lack of impartiality undermines the quality of the documentation.

## Victim-centric approach

Being impartial does not mean ignoring victims. Human rights documenters should remain sensitive to their needs. Some victims do not want to speak and you cannot force them. But if they are willing, their consent is required to conduct interviews, take pictures, or use their personal information. You should also explain to them all the risks, benefits, and reasons for the documentation without overpromising anything. If they have experienced serious trauma, connect them with support services if possible.

Impartiality is not easy. Everyone has been affected by this war, and many people have lost loved ones. It is difficult to put aside personal hatred and remain impartial. Also, others might pressure you to be harsher towards one side over another. But in the long-run, staying impartial will have greater benefits. Ultimately, the facts should be able to speak for themselves, so focus on gathering all the facts through high quality documentation.