



LEADERSHIP CASE  
**SYRIA DIRECT**

Since independence in 1946, Syria has been roiled by a steady passage of armed revolts and coups, with very few periods of peace and stability, and an equally steady erosion of human rights. In addition to the devastating consequences of political turmoil in Syria and surrounding nations, the country is also stricken by the lingering effects of a savage five-year drought that brought food production to its knees, and drove a generation of farmers into

cities seeking an alternative way of making a living.

But Syria’s current civil war, which began as a pro-democracy protest in 2011, overtakes all of these issues in terms of the breadth and depth of misery that has ensued. The toll of deaths and permanent disabilities is numbered in millions. Over half the country’s population has been displaced. Nearly a dozen other countries have been drawn into the conflict, either formally, through the actions of independent militia, or from the violence spilling across borders. Cities have been reduced to rubble; all of Syria’s UNESCO World Heritage sites have been vandalized, a graphic symbol of a country that has been utterly broken.

Syria is also, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, a deadly place to be a journalist. Virtually all foreign journalists were either expelled by the Assad regime or fled for their own safety when the civil war exploded in 2011. Who is left to tell the stories of what is really going on?

**“ I COULD USE MY EXPERIENCE, MY SKILL-SET AND MY NETWORK OF CONTACTS TO HELP SYRIANS TELL THE STORY AS ONLY THEY CAN. ”**

As ever in the digital era, citizen journalists stepped in. Citizen journalists travel incognito; they are connected, and they are able to go to places accredited journalists, especially foreign ones, may not. They can and do tell the story as it plays out on the ground. But citizen journalism is not enough. “There was a problem with the news coming out of Syria,” says Amjad Tadros, an award-winning journalist with decades of experience of reporting out of the region. There was the narrow set of stories mainstream media were able to generate. State sponsored media were peddling pro-Assad propaganda; and the victims of the violence were telling their truth, which was anti-Assad. International commentators, who may never have been to Syria, were writing misinformed analyses. Put it all together, and “truth was being lost,” says Amjad. Also, there was real concern about the risk of news fatigue around Syria, and the confusion caused by the multiple agendas of different players

**ABOUT AMJAD**

Entrepreneur and founder of several businesses in media, communication, advertising, food, security and logistics.

**Co-founded Syria Direct in 2013.**

**Investigative journalist and Middle East Producer for CBS News** since 1990, including for *60 Minutes*.

Winner of multiple awards for journalism, including **Emmy and Alfred DuPont awards**.

**2017 John P. McNulty Prize Laureate.**

Fellow of the inaugural class of the Middle East Leadership Initiative of the Aspen Global Leadership Network.

amplified the risk that the world would simply stop listening.

A truth-telling media, for Amjad, is not just about getting the facts straight, but about “idiot-proofing” society. “It is the era of fake news. There are lots of people who systematically undermine the role of media. It breaks my heart. I have to keep teaching people about the value of telling the truth,” he says. When the global powers are misinformed, the consequences for Syria are painful. But when even Syrians themselves are in the dark about events and their implications, never knowing what they can believe, life becomes intolerable and society is utterly ruptured. “If you live in a society where people are better informed, it’s a better society,” says Amjad. “When people are informed, it is harder for extremists to get away with murder.”

Amjad’s personal responsibility to address the dearth of truth-telling crystallized during his Aspen Global Leadership Network fellowship: “My time as a Fellow taught me that intractable problems will only be solved when those capable of making a difference, raise their voices.

“I appreciated that I could use my experience, my skill-set and my network of contacts to help Syrians tell the story as only they can,” he says.

And so with the support of the US-based Global Peace and Development Charitable Trust, Amjad established Syria Direct, alongside his full-time work as the Middle East Producer for CBS News. His vision was to harness the passion that drives citizen journalists while also training them in the disciplines of objective reporting. “Syria Direct is there to tell the truth, without an agenda,” Amjad says. “The teaching is: it’s fine to have a bias, and it’s fine to have a point of view. But your opinion is not relevant in telling the story. Reporting a balanced truth—even when it does not support your own personal political opinion—is the only way to tell your story.”

Syria Direct is staffed by a blend of Syrians, media-savvy foreigners, and translators. The organization is based on the principle that journalism is better learned through experience than taught. Talented aspiring Syrian journalists—exiles and refugees—spend one month in the classroom receiving training in hard skills as well as lessons on the importance of impartiality, followed by two

## ABOUT SYRIA DIRECT

- Syria Direct was founded in 2013 as a non-profit that **trains aspiring Syrian journalists in objective reporting**, and serves as an **online news outlet** dedicated to **covering the complex and multi-faceted Syrian conflict** in English and Arabic.
- With on-the-ground knowledge and connections in Syria, the organization uniquely provides **in-depth reporting on implications of the conflict** that most other outlets do not have access to.
- It has **an online readership of 100,000**, and more through syndication and secondary coverage. It is a **primary source for governments, international agencies and NGOs**.
- Syria Direct operates out of Amman, Jordan with 20 full-time staff, a combination of Syrian graduates of the in-house training program, foreign writers and volunteers.
- At any given time, cohorts of approximately 12 Syrians are enrolled in the **3-month training program**, many without previous experience in journalism.
- **More than half of Syria Direct’s 165 graduates currently work as journalists**, with many starting their own media companies.

months cultivating and practicing the skills required for objective, accurate reporting. During this time, trainees pitch and write stories for publication; mentors work with them as editors and translators; and, through a rigorous peer-review process, work is revised and refined until it gets the go-ahead for publishing. It’s a process that is critical for the development of the awareness of any journalist, but increasingly rare in the era of instant news.

The Syrian trainees themselves are not the sole beneficiaries of the process. “We have young Americans and other foreigners working with us as journalists and volunteers. There is enormous value in Syria Direct for them; we are exposing Ivy League graduates from privileged backgrounds and deepening their understanding of the Arab world.”

Amjad believes deeply in the trainees. They include individuals like Noura Hourani, a mid-30s mother of three and former English teacher. Shaken by what she experienced in the early days of the civil war, and disturbed by the difference between what she saw on the ground and what news channels were broadcasting, she set out to become part of a different wave. Without previous journalism experience, she travelled to Jordan with her family and signed up for the program. There she joined individuals like Waleed Khaled a-Noufal, who was targeted as an activist and citizen journalist in Syria and could not finish high school as a result. Three days before his home was raided, Waleed made it





Above: Syrian residents forced to leave

across the border to Jordan, where he finished his schooling and went on to train with Syria Direct. Now, Waleed is employed full-time by Syria Direct, and recently worked on an in-depth report for the Guardian. Waleed, of his training, says: "I went from being an activist to a journalist."

Noura now works as the Managing Arabic Editor for Syria Direct, and in June 2018, she won the Women in News Editorial Leadership Award from the World Association for Newspapers and News Publishers for her work—the sole recipient from the region.

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Syria Direct, thus, is about telling stories through first-class, properly constructed and properly edited investigative journalism. But it's also about training a generation of reporters and thinkers into an appreciation of, and a firm commitment to, objectivity.

Their work is critical not only for the record, but also for those trapped in the country's towns and villages by war and circumstances. Syria Direct generates credible news briefs and articles that rely on the intimacy of contact that only its journalists can achieve—about the predatory smugglers who have become wealthy on the desperation of refugees; the bombings of hospitals which have killed nearly a thousand medical personnel; the cruel stigma faced by former women detainees; even features about how to produce cooking gas if you're trapped in a blockaded town. The Syria Direct journalists have met a crying need, delivering reporting that is credible, and reliable.

It is taken seriously in high places. Syria Direct stories have on occasion led to policy change, for example generating international pressure to convince the Syrian government to allow intermittent

aid deliveries to reach besieged towns.

Something all journalists in contested environments need to develop is conviction in their research. "From the opposition, to the government, to the Kurds, they all insult us because we tell the truth," Amjad says. And so fact-checking—and checking against the journalist's own credulity—are more than a moral imperative: thoroughness is also a mechanism by which balance and truth can be accessed.

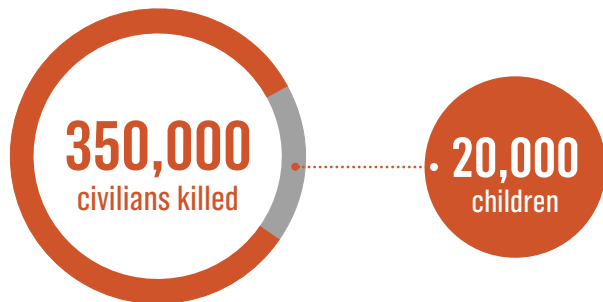
It takes both assertive leadership and empowering delegation to build a space where passionate people from diverse backgrounds can learn, be inspired and do important work even in an environment of pain. Amjad contributes his guidance and best practices from his years of training and experience, and actively encourages his younger staff and trainees to self-manage according to their talents and interests. "I guide them, but they lead," says Amjad. "Syria Direct has the infrastructure. It is they—the trainees and the volunteers—who have the energy, and the ideas. People in their 20s have different ideas, and different objectives. They have a strong experimental urge. They do work they love, and when they leave us, they do so with a better understanding," says Amjad.

Amjad has a deep appreciation for the long-term benefits of re-establishing the fundamentals of journalistic ethics and methods in the region. He sees Syria Direct as a global model for honest reporting in highly difficult circumstances, and hopes to expand their presence to cover other conflicts, whether in Iraq, Yemen, or elsewhere as Middle East Direct. It gives engagement and meaning to the lives of its pupils and reporters, and as Syria Direct's alumni spread across the region's media, they are transforming reporting in the Middle East. "The way we affect other people's lives is what counts," he says. "Every three months we graduate another 12 people, and it's become clear that most of them don't want to leave. They are changed: we have taught them something critical about freedom. For the rest of their lives they will remember their time with Syria Direct, and the values we share. We hope this will affect how they work with others."

In a world in which truth is often drowned out by the loudest echo chamber, Syria Direct is not just a window into a horrible conflict, but an antidote to distortion of truth in the global body politic.

# THE CONTEXT OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

The Syrian Civil War is the world's deadliest ongoing conflict. At the time of writing, nearly 350,000 civilians have been killed, including over 20,000 children.



More than half of all Syrians are displaced—6 million internally, and 5.6 million as global refugees.



Journalism and free press have been under attack throughout the conflict.



Over 200 journalists have been killed since 2011.

19 foreign and citizen journalists were killed in 2016 alone.



## IN HIS OWN WORDS: WHAT AMJAD HAS LEARNED

### **If not us, then who?**

"My time as a Fellow taught me that intractable problems will only be solved when those capable of making a difference raise their voices. I appreciated that I could use my experience, my skill-set and my network of contacts to help Syrians tell the story as only they can."

### **If you are not passionate about it, don't do it.**

"Things never turn out the way you expect them to. It's easy to give up.

The only way to keep it going, is you believing in it. Those individuals who have been successful are doing something they care about."

### **A good society relies on truth-telling.**

"It is the era of fake news. There are lots of people who systematically undermine the role of media. It breaks my heart. I have to keep teaching people about the value of telling the truth."