POV

Community Engagement & Education

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Last Men in Aleppo
A Film by Feras Fayyad

www.pbs.org/pov
I’m here to share a story made of blood and tears. I am here because I believe in the ability of film to bring justice to Syria.

The peaceful Syrian uprising of 2011 developed into an armed conflict once the ruling regime of Bashar Al-Assad chose to respond with military force. The war in Syria gradually transformed into a dark hole that began destroying the civilian population, and the line between right and wrong became blurred. Officials in all factions were exhibiting Machiavellian behavior, meaning they were compromising principles and ethics in their efforts to achieve their goals. Civilians were glad to put their trust and confidence in the one group that distinguished itself from the rest. I’m talking about those providing civil defense, the group known in the international community as the White Helmets.

In March 2011, I was twice held by members of Assad’s intelligence services after I made a film about freedom of speech. In a secret prison, I saw humanitarian workers held alongside artists and journalists; I witnessed men, women and children being tortured to death.

In 2013, I began to develop the idea for this film as I followed Raed Saleh, who later became the leader of the White Helmets. He was organizing ordinary people into a volunteer brigade that would deal with the massive air strikes that hit their streets and homes; I accompanied them to places just after bombs had fallen. They saved the lives of hundreds of children and families. Soon they were targeted directly by the regime and by Russian drone strikes. Many died, leaving their families...
with no means of support. Yet the people I was filming only grew more determined to continue their work to save victims. I was astonished by their ability to turn loss into motivation to continue searching for life under the rubble. This made me think about how to convey the nature of this war, as seen through the eyes of these people. I wanted to explore their inner psychological worlds to understand the struggles that they lived through. A film would offer a chance to demonstrate how repulsive the war in Syria was and to raise questions regarding the value and dignity of human life. It could also shine a light on the role of international law in the prosecution of war criminals and how important it is to hold them accountable for their involvement in fostering extremism, terrorism and mass killings.

This film also speaks to the power of using art and documentary filmmaking to illustrate the absurdity of war. One moment stayed with me: Khaled, our main subject, extends his hand to save a victim trapped under debris. The image looks exactly like Michelangelo’s fresco of the creation of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, which shows God and Adam reaching their hands toward each other. It is a moment that illustrates the value of the human touch, and a cry for closer examination of the horror of war and any situation that requires us to take control of our lives. The film provides a pathway to discussing these issues, so that we might broach the subjects of isolationism and nationalist, political and religious extremism.

Our heroes save all victims, even those who have caused the deaths of their fellow White Helmets. This film is a tool for achieving forgiveness and overcoming vengeance, and I don’t think it’s too grandiose to say that this film can assist in our search for the meaning of life. It can inspire audiences to look closely at the gift of giving one’s life so that another may live. Hopefully, through the film the White Helmets will earn the recognition they deserve. And, of course, I am hopeful that when people are given a clear-eyed view of the Syrian civil war, they will be motivated to take action to stop this ongoing tragedy by seeking peace in Syria and helping the people who are asking for help.

War brings out the worst in human beings, but it also brings out the best in us. The White Helmets are a living example of that. Last Men in Aleppo is their story.

Feras Fayyad
Director, Last Men in Aleppo
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Reviewed relevant facts and statistics regarding the global refugee crisis and issues of resettlement.
In 2015, after four years of war in Syria, inhabitants of Aleppo are starved of food and resources. Through the eyes of the volunteer rescue workers known as the White Helmets, *Last Men in Aleppo* (83 min.) takes viewers to the streets of an ancient city in the midst of a historically deadly war.

We ride along with the White Helmets on their daily routine of responding to bomb sites, gathering body parts and corpses, scanning the skies for the jets and helicopters that signal the next attack and pulling survivors from beneath crushing rubble. The struggle of the men who wear white helmets is not predominantly political; it is the struggle to sleep, eat, comfort children and preserve basic human dignity in the midst of recurring atrocities.

The film is a heartbreaking portrait of devastation framed by courage and resilience. It confronts viewers with horror and demands that we not look away. At the same time, it invites us to see past abstract policies and proxy wars and acknowledge the individuals who must fight for sanity in a city where war has become the norm.
Last Men in Aleppo is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- Your local PBS station
- Groups that have discussed previous PBS and POV films relating to Syria, including The War Show, Dalya’s Other Country and Return to Homs.
- Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the “Key Issues” section
- Academic departments and student groups at colleges, universities and high schools
- Faith-based organizations and institutions
- First responders
- Immigrant groups or anyone dealing with U.S. immigration policy
- High school students, youth groups and clubs
- Cultural, art and historical organizations, institutions and museums
- Civic, fraternal, veterans and community groups

Last Men in Aleppo is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people looking to explore the following topics:

- courage
- crimes against humanity
- desensitization
- fatherhood/family
- foreign policy
- human rights
- patriotism
- peace studies
- political protest
- political violence
- rescue workers/first responders
- Syria
- war crimes
- White Helmets

USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use Last Men in Aleppo to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit www.pov.org/engage
Who Are the White Helmets?

Syrian Civil Defence, also known as the White Helmets, is Syria’s largest civil society group and has become a key neutral, unarmed party in the Syrian conflict. The group was inspired by a Quranic verse that says, “to save a life is to save all of humanity.” This volunteer corps consists of more than 3,000 civilians, including former students and professionals, who receive five weeks of training in Turkey and a monthly stipend for their work conducting search-and-rescue operations.

Syrian Civil Defence was founded in 2013 after a Turkey-based international contracting firm received funding from United States, the United Kingdom and Japan for non-lethal aid to Syria. The organization partnered with a Turkish non-governmental organization that specialized in earthquake response and established a training center in southern Turkey that teaches urban search-and-rescue techniques, first aid, and firefighting. The plan for the volunteer force borrowed the World War I-era doctrine of civil defense, which provided for first responders to mitigate the casualties from the widespread bombing of civilian areas.

According to the organization, since the White Helmets started operating in Syria in this emergency services role, 175 volunteers have been killed. Their centers have been bombed, and the first responders find themselves targeted, as Syrian regime or Russian aircraft often return after a first strike to attack the White Helmets and other rescuers. The White Helmets work in opposition-controlled areas; in regime-held areas, emergency services are sponsored by the government. Videos of rescues conducted by the White Helmets are often posted by the White Helmets themselves in an effort to show the world the horrors they are witnessing.

Sources


Syrian Refugees in Turkey

Under international law, a refugee is defined as a person fleeing armed conflict or persecution who has a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a social group and who has crossed a border into a new country to find safety. The 1951 Refugee Convention and other relevant international laws dictate that refugees should not be expelled by host nations or returned to situations where their lives and freedom could be under threat.

The Syrian government’s brutal crackdown on the pro-democracy protests that erupted in March 2011 spawned armed opposition. Clashes between government and anti-government armed groups intensified and by February 2012 had metastasized into a civil war. By the end of 2012, nearly 650,000 men, women and children had fled Syria in the largest annual exodus by a single refugee group since the conflict in Kosovo in 1999. The number of refugees from Syria has increased dramatically since the fighting began, topping 5 million across 120 countries by March 2017. Most refugees remained in the neighboring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, with Turkey hosting nearly 3 million Syrian refugees. Half of those seeking refuge from Syria’s conflict are children.

Syrians who cross the border into Turkey may register with the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in order to receive protection and support. Once an individual registers, UNHCR determines refugee status and helps that person reach a long-term solution through local integration or resettlement. When safe return to the home country is possible, UNHCR assists in effecting this. The majority of refugees worldwide do voluntarily return to their home countries once it is judged safe for them to do so. With the war in Syria now in its seventh year, and with violence showing no signs of abating, Syrian refugees have not been able to return home. More than 90 percent of the Syrian refugees in Turkey are settled in host communities. They now make up about 3.5 percent of Turkey’s population, which has led to increasing tensions,
particularly in localities where resettled Syrians now outnumber local populations.

Turkey has been struggling to meet the demands of a semi-permanent refugee population. Resettled Syrians have reported confusion in their communities over bureaucratic processes, including registration procedures that lead to permanent legal status. The resulting feeling of impermanence prevents them from learning the local language and culture. Nearly 45 percent of Syrian children holding refugee status in Turkey do not attend school. A lack of job opportunities, as well as administrative barriers to entering the job market, have pushed many Syrian refugees, including children, to work in informal and illegal employment.

Sources


Civilians in Armed Conflict

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic was created by the United Nations' Human Rights Council with a mandate to investigate all alleged violations of international law since March 2011 in Syria. In early 2017, the commission reported that the parties on all sides of the conflict have resorted to tactics of war that violate international humanitarian law, with civilians—especially women, children and elderly persons—disproportionately affected by the war. Additionally, the commission has documented vicious attacks on civilian infrastructure—including hospitals, schools and water sources—that amount to war crimes by pro-government forces. It has also determined that the government is using prohibited weapons, including improvised chlorine weapons—a choking agent—and cluster bombs, which pose a higher threat to civilians because of their wider range and the potential for unexploded sub-munitions.
As the Syrian conflict is fought largely in densely populated areas, with Syrian regime and foreign fighter planes striking targets in cities, it has taken a heavy toll on civilians. As of early 2017, it is estimated that more than half a million Syrians have been killed (over 2 percent of the total population) and over half of Syrians have left their homes because of the violence, either moving within Syria or leaving the country, according to one of the most recent estimates available. In December 2016 alone, the International Committee of the Red Cross reported helping to evacuate 35,000 people from eastern Aleppo during the government’s last violent offensive, which took place following a starve-or-surrender campaign that prevented food and medical supplies from entering opposition-held areas of the city.

The Fourth Geneva Convention, adopted in 1949, mandates the protection of civilian persons in a time of war. This basic tenet dictates that civilians, along with medical and religious personnel, journalists and humanitarian workers, must be protected against direct attack unless they take part in hostilities. Customary international humanitarian law imposes both positive and negative obligations: states must take action to prevent violations of international humanitarian law and also must refrain from encouraging or assisting other parties in conducting such violations. Enforcement of these international laws, however, can be impacted by geopolitical considerations and is often slow to progress, especially in cases of crimes committed in armed conflicts.

Sources
Selected People Featured in Last Men in Aleppo

**Khaled** - father who feels strongly about remaining in Aleppo, but worries about the safety of his wife and children

**Mahmoud** - young man who left his studies to become a rescue worker
Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen or pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion:

• In a word, how would you describe your initial reaction to the film?
• If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you say?
• Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?
• What did you learn about Syria from this film? What else do you want to know?

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions:

• What did you learn from this film that you wish everyone knew? What would change if everyone knew it?
• If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be? What do you hope their main takeaway would be?
• Complete this sentence: I am inspired by this film (or discussion) to __________.
DISCUSSION PROMPTS

When War Becomes Normal

What did you feel as you watched the first rescue on screen? What about the third or fourth, or the matter-of-fact collection of body parts? How does repeated exposure affect your response? Do you think desensitization helps rescuers do their work, traumatizes them, or both?

A first responder warns people on the street following a bombing, “Guys, don't gather in one place. They might attack again. Get the children inside. They might bomb here again.” How is a community affected when the simple act of gathering in a group puts people at risk of being bombed?

Why do you suppose Mahmoud thinks it’s better to lie to his parents about what he and his brother are doing than to be honest and admit they aren’t working in Turkey? What are the pros and cons of protecting parents from the truth?

One of the men says, “The bombing, the ruins... It’s unreal. It cannot be comprehended by humans or anything else. Imagine sitting at home, and suddenly the entire building collapses. This is destruction on a massive scale. It’s truly horrifying.” Can you picture what your life would be like if every time you saw a plane or helicopter in the sky, you wondered who would lose a home, limb or life? How can we develop empathy for those living in conditions that are almost unimaginable? How do documentaries help?

The men listen to news reports about things such as Syrian refugees headed to the Turkish border and White Helmets centers and hospitals being destroyed by Russian bombs. As you listen through their ears, what sorts of details do you notice that escaped your attention when you listened to news reports about Syria prior to viewing the film?

Every culture and every military campaign creates songs that memorialize important historical moments and ideas. What messages did you hear in the songs sung by the White Helmets? What did the songs tell you about the reality of living in Syria under Bashar Al-Assad?

What was your reaction to the juxtaposition of Khaled talking on the phone with his daughters and finding out he was killed by bombing during a rescue mission?

Policy Decisions

Khaled asks, “Where is the world, man? Where are the Arabs?... Why don’t our Arab neighbors help our people? ... Where is humanity? ... Nobody cares about anybody anymore.” Who do you think is responsible for helping? What are they obligated to do? In your view, what has prevented the global community from doing more to end the bombings?

Are there any ways that the film deepened or changed your
thinking about U.S. policy regarding Syria or other armed conflicts across the globe?

In your view, would Syrians be well-served by Bashar Al-Assad being tried for international crimes, including war crimes and crimes against humanity? Why or why not?

Khaled’s daughter shows symptoms of malnutrition, but there are no vitamins to be had in the city because of the siege. What are the ethical implications of allowing authorities to starve people into submission? It is a recognized war crime to use starvation of civilians as a weapon of war. Do you think it should be illegal to impede the flow of food, medicine or water? Why or why not?

What do you think should happen to (or in) Syria now?

**Hard Choices**

What did you learn from the film about the ways in which daily injustice and war create impossible choices?

Like many of his fellow White Helmets, Khaled vows to stay in Aleppo, even if that choice means death: “I’m like the fish. I can’t live outside Aleppo. Just like they can’t live outside water.” Why do many people feel so strongly attached to a particular place that they are willing to risk their lives to stay? What is the pull of the places we call home?

Khaled is at peace with the decision to stay and risk his own life, but making that choice for his children is, he says, a “dilemma.” Ultimately he decides, “I’d rather they die before my eyes than have something happen to them far away.” During a war, what factors would influence your decision to stay in or leave your country?

**Preserving Human Dignity**

Despite Khaled’s declaration that under Assad, “All dignity is dead,” what do you see Mahmoud, Khaled and other White Helmet volunteers do that helps maintain or restore human dignity?

Given everything that’s going on, why do you think Khaled bought a pet fish?

Mahmoud is uncomfortable visiting the home of the boys he saved: “It felt like we were there to show off.” What do you think his visit means to the family, and especially to the young boy who held on to him, trying to get him to stay? When the boy pleads with Mahmoud to tell him the story of his own rescue, Mahmoud answers, “God wants you to live and grow up to be a man like us.” What did that answer tell you about Mahmoud’s personal motivations for the visit?

Even though the rescue volunteers know that the ceasefire isn’t being fully observed, they take advantage of the tem-
porary truce to treat their kids to a day at a playground. Of all the things they might have done, why do you think they picked this activity?

Mahmoud says that settling down and having a family of his own is an “impossible dream,” but he attends a wedding: “It’s so weird. People are dying and others are getting married.” Why would some people make a point of continuing with normal life events, while others can’t reconcile celebrations with the reality of daily life?

At a White Helmets center, Khaled likens his fellow first responders to his family: “Sitting with you guys makes it all worth it, I swear.” How do the rescue workers help one another cope with the atrocities they see and experience?

Would you be more likely to describe volunteers in the White Helmets as “courageous” or “foolish”? What’s the difference?

Additional media literacy questions are available at: www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
Taking Action

• Follow up viewing with a study circle on modern rules of war. What do the relevant conventions and declarations require their signatories to do (or not do)? Given current technologies, what would you add or delete? Discuss what should happen to governments, leaders or individual combatants who break the rules.

• Get in touch with local chapters of organizations providing humanitarian aid to Syrian civilians or refugees and find out what you can do to help.

• Host a screening as a tribute or fundraiser for local first responders. Offer them opportunities to share their own stories.
**ALEPPO MEDIA CENTER (AMC)**
https://www.facebook.com/AleppoAMCen

A good source for recent events, AMC gathers stories from non-government affiliated reporters across Syria and was involved in the production of the film. The group’s Facebook page is in English, but its official site (http://www.amc-sy.net/) is in Arabic. You can use Google translate for a rough translation.

**ETHICAL CHARTER FOR SYRIAN MEDIA ALLIANCE**
http://almethaq-sy.org/en

This website includes links to independent Syrian media outlets that are signatories to the charter.

**HITTING ROCK BOTTOM: HOW 2016 BECAME THE WORST YEAR FOR SYRIA’S CHILDREN**
www.unicef.org/media/files/UN055709.pdf

This U.N. report covers the humanitarian impact of the Syrian war.

**SYRIAN CIVIL DEFENCE ASSOCIATION**
http://syriacivildefense.org

The official website of the White Helmets includes history, mission statement and principles, news reports and tweets.

**SYRIAN OBSERVATORY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**
www.syriaehr.com/en

The website of a Britain-based collective of pro-democracy people inside and outside Syria aggregates news stories and reports on human rights in Syria.

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE: “U.S. RELATIONS WITH SYRIA”**
www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm

This website summarizes the history and current status of U.S.-Syria relations. See the department’s Syria page for press releases on current events: www.state.gov/p/nea/ci/sy/.
To order *Last Men in Aleppo* for home use, visit http://grasshopperfilm.com/film/last-men-in-aleppo

*HOW TO BUY THE FILM*

Produced by American Documentary, Inc., *POV* is public television’s premier showcase for nonfiction films. The series airs Mondays at 10 p.m. on PBS from June to September, with primetime specials during the year. Since 1988, *POV* has been the home for the world’s boldest contemporary filmmakers, celebrating intriguing personal stories that spark conversation and inspire action. Always an innovator, *POV* discovers fresh new voices and creates interactive experiences that shine a light on social issues and elevate the art of storytelling. With our documentary broadcasts, original online programming and dynamic community engagement campaigns, we are committed to supporting films that capture the imagination and present diverse perspectives.

*POV* films have won 36 Emmy® Awards, 19 George Foster Peabody Awards, 12 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards, three Academy Awards®, the first-ever George Polk Documentary Film Award and the Prix Italia. The *POV* series has been honored with a Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking, three IDA Awards for Best Curated Series and the National Association of Latino Independent Producers Award for Corporate Commitment to Diversity. More information is available at www.pbs.org/pov.

**POV Digital www.pbs.org/pov**

Since 1994, *POV Digital* has driven new storytelling initiatives and interactive production for *POV*. The department created PBS’s first program website and its first web-based documentary (POV’s Borders) and has won major awards, including a Webby Award (and six nominations) and an Online News Association Award. *POV Digital* continues to explore the future of independent nonfiction media through its digital productions and the *POV* Hackathon lab, where media makers and technologists collaborate to reinvent storytelling forms. @povdocs on Twitter.

**POV Community Engagement and Education**

*POV’s* Community Engagement and Education team works with educators, community organizations and PBS stations to present more than 650 free screenings every year. In addition, we distribute free discussion guides and standards-aligned lesson plans for each of our films. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

**American Documentary, Inc. www.amdoc.org**

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

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Front cover: Khaled during a rescue.
Credit: AMC 2017