

Managing Director of the ABC  
Ms Michelle Guthrie  
GPO Box 9994  
Sydney NSW 2001

**RE: Letter of complaint to ABC Audience and Consumer Affairs**

**Program:** ABC TV, *Australian Story*

**Date of broadcast:** 21/11/2016; available on *Australian Story* website

**Title:** *The Road From Damascus*

**Producers:** Winsome Denyer, Sophie McNeill

**Presenter:** Sophie McNeill

**Research:** Fouad AbuGosh

**Specialist Contributor:** Caroline Jones

17 January 2017

Dear Ms Guthrie,

Because of the seriousness of the matter detailed below, we believe it is appropriate to bring it to your direct attention for consideration.

We, the signatories of this letter, believe that *Australian Story's* 'The Road From Damascus' breaches the ABC Code of Practice, particularly in regard to **Accuracy; Impartiality and Diversity of Perspectives;** and **Harm and Offence.** We maintain that the program's presenter, ABC Middle East correspondent Ms Sophie McNeill, has allowed her personal views and friendships to influence her journalism. In the program, she takes a credulous approach to the 'opposition' in Syria, effectively giving credibility to rebels that are affiliated with al-Qaeda.

We maintain that the breaches of the Code are significant and relate to highly contentious matters which impact on Australia's security. Also, these matters are the subject of ongoing debate about the war in Syria and deserve the highest standards of journalistic practice.

Please note, signatories of this letter include four Syrians in Australia on humanitarian visas.

**SUMMARY**

**Breaches of the ABC Code of Practice that relate to Accuracy; Impartiality and Diversity of Perspectives; and Harm and Offence**

1. *Australian Story's* 'The Road From Damascus' unduly favors a militarized 'opposition' in Syria, which is widely known to include foreign 'jihadists' fighting for an Islamic state or for a Caliphate. *Australian Story* displays this bias without making reasonable efforts to ensure that material facts presented are accurate and without giving due consideration to both the wider context of the war in Syria and the suffering of people at the hands of anti-government armed groups.

2. *Australian Story* introduces Mr Khaled Naanaa, the main character in the program, as compassionate and credible. He is presented as a close personal friend of Ms McNeill, and this gives his claims additional weight. His assertions are not questioned or qualified despite the fact that there is reason to believe he provided material support to Ahrar al-Sham, an armed group supported by Saudi Arabia and Turkey and affiliated with al-Qaeda through its membership of Jaish al-Fatah (the Army of Conquest). Australian academic Dr Jeremy Salt describes Ahrar al-Sham as 'one of the most violent takfiri/jihadist groups in Syria'. (See the letter Dr Salt sent *Australian Story* below. We have his permission to include it in this complaint letter.)

3. *Australian Story's* tacit acceptance of Ms McNeill's bias would indicate to viewers that there is, in effect, an implicit ABC editorial policy with regard to Syria expressed in the program. This contravenes the Code of Practice and makes it unlikely that the viewpoints of Syrians opposed to the militarized 'opposition' will be given equal time and respect in such high-profile ABC programs as *Australian Story*.

4. 'The Road From Damascus' makes no effort to ensure the accuracy of its fact-based content through the presentation of a range of perspectives and contending views. No consideration is given to the fact that there are alternative views that an ABC audience would find even more compelling. Given the contentious and highly politicized nature of the matters dealt with in the program, ABC viewers would expect that all fact-claims had been carefully checked and no relevant material omitted. We maintain that this was not done.

5. *Australian Story* does not consider the views and experiences of those Syrians now in Australia on humanitarian visas who oppose the rebels. It does not consider the distress that the program could cause these Syrians by giving credibility to a 'rebel' supporter, and thus potentially breaches their trust in the national broadcaster.

6. We hold that ABC audiences would expect to be informed of the views and experiences of Syrians who support the continuation of their secular, liberal multi-faith society, which provides freedom of religion and equal opportunities for women. Presenting their views could have helped address the issues raised by Ms McNeill's pro-'opposition' bias. Furthermore, as the national broadcaster, the ABC has a commitment to basic democratic principles, including the rule of law, freedom of speech and religion, parliamentary democracy and equality of opportunity. In the light of this, Syrians genuinely committed to these beliefs and values should have had their views presented in *Australian Story*.

7. We maintain that the information presented in the program cannot be considered reliable because it favors the testimony of 'rebel' supporters, namely Mr Naanaa, James Sadri (The Syria Campaign), Dr Ammar Ghanem (Syrian American Medical Society), and Widney Brown (Physicians for Human Rights). By giving implicit support to 'opposition' armed groups, the national broadcaster does not act in the public interest. It could contribute to the decision of some Australians to support jihadist extremism both here and overseas, which is in contravention of government policy and detrimental to our national security.

There is extensive documentation on file in support of our concerns and we would be pleased to forward it, upon request. Dr Salt's letter to *Australian Story* presented below highlights the need for a much more sophisticated and balanced commentary on Syria than that presented by *Australian Story*.

Our most basic concern is that *Australian Story* gives weight to people who support the militarized opposition in Syria and denies a voice to the vast majority of Syrians, people who would respect Australia's democratic beliefs and who would be potential victims of that 'opposition'.

Another key concern is that despite the pro-opposition bias in 'The Road From Damascus', the 'opposition' is not defined. There is no description of its violence, agenda or tactics, so ABC viewers could be misled into thinking the 'opposition', as represented by Mr Naanaa, is a homogeneous benign force. Yet, that 'opposition' includes [Ahrar al-Sham](#) in control of Madaya where Mr Naanaa worked in a field hospital as well as rebels and foreign 'jihadists' who besieged the towns of Kafriya and Fu'ah.

*Australian Story* tells viewers,

*All sides of the conflict in Syria have used siege tactics, affecting up to a million people.*

However, it gives no information about rebel sieges even though the suffering of the general population in rebel besieged towns is tremendous, as described in [a Los Angeles Times article](#),

*A punishing siege imposed by Islamist rebels has cut off (Fuah and nearby Kefraya) in northwest Syria for the last 18 months, leaving them at the mercy of truck bombs, mortar barrages, and the terrifying staccato of sniper fire.*

A [video on Youtube](#) (published in February 2013) shows rebel supporters, including young men from Saudi Arabia, chanting at a rally in a town close to Kafriya and Fu'ah,

*We will slaughter all the Shiites in Kfarya and Foa*

Also heard in the video is a 'revolutionary' singing at the rally,

*We destroyed America with a civilian plane; the Trade Tower became a pile of dust; if you call me a terrorist, I say I am honored...our terror ... is a divine call.*

*Australian Story* presents Mr Naanaa's claims and the evidence he presents as irrefutable, but journalists who have reported from Syria have cautioned against a naïve acceptance of rebel 'propaganda'. For example, the month before Mr Naanaa went to live in rebel-held Madaya, Channel 4's [Alex Thomson recounted his experience](#) of being set up to be killed by rebels:

*I'm quite clear the rebels deliberately set us up to be shot by the Syrian Army. Dead journos are bad for Damascus.*

Nawaf al Thani, a human rights lawyer and a member of the Arab League Observer mission to Syria in 2012, explained to Alex Thomson [he had had the same experience](#) in al-Zabadani, a town close to Madaya.

In the same month, [BBC's Jon Williams wrote](#),

*Given the difficulties of reporting inside Syria, video filed by the opposition on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube may provide some insight into the story on the ground. But stories are never black and white - often shades of grey. Those opposed to President Assad have an agenda. One senior Western official went as far as to describe their YouTube communications strategy as "brilliant". But he also likened it to so-called "psy-ops", brainwashing techniques used by the US and other military to convince people of things that may not necessarily be true.*

*A healthy scepticism is one of the essential qualities of any journalist - never more so than in reporting conflict. The stakes are high - all may not always be as it seems.*

It is not only BBC's Jon Williams who urges care when assessing the integrity of rebel 'Youtube communications'. Professor Ted Postol from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology does, also, if indirectly. [A scientific report by Dr Postol and Richard Lloyd](#), a former UN weapons inspector, strongly suggests that rebels were responsible for faking the chemical weapons attack in Damascus on 21 August 2013, and if the science is reliable, it means the images and videos rebels presented to the world purportedly showing hundreds of victims of a government chemical weapons attack were fabricated.

In 'The Road From Damascus', Widney Brown (Physicians for Human Rights), James Sadri (The Syria Campaign), and Dr Ammar Ghanem (Syrian American Medical Society) all bolster Mr Naanaa's claims in support of rebels. However, there is reason to question the objectivity and integrity of NGOs that favor the militarized opposition in Syria. For example, in May 2014, two Nobel Peace Laureates and over a hundred scholars, journalists and activists signed [a letter to Human Rights Watch](#) criticizing that NGO's links with different arms of the US government, including the CIA.

Before taking up a position with Physicians for Human Rights, Widney Brown worked with both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. In 2010, [she spoke in support of Amnesty's ties with Moazzam Begg](#), a former Guantanamo Bay detainee and now [a vocal advocate for jihad in Syria](#). Also, Ms Brown was with Amnesty International 2011 when it produced [a controversial report](#) claiming the Syrian government targeted the wounded and health workers. The report made similar claims against Syrian medical staff to those Mr Naanaa makes in *Australian Story*.

People wounded in protests or other incidents related to the uprising have been verbally abused and physically assaulted in state- run hospitals, including by medical staff ... (page 4)

American lawyer Franklin Lamb visited Syria after the report's publication. After visiting hospitals and speaking with hospital staff, he wrote [Amnesty International's Flawed Syrian Hospitals "Investigation"](#). He writes,

*Syria's medical profession has justifiably taken umbrage at what it considers, as one Physician described, "Amnesty International's "gratuitous defamation of Syria's medical community."*

A critique of [a 2015 Amnesty International report on Aleppo](#) points out that Amnesty International relied on witnesses introduced to it by groups receiving funds from countries 'heavily involved in seeking overthrow of the Damascus government'. (Ref: *Eight Problems with Amnesty's Report on Aleppo Syria*, by Rick Sterling / May 14th, 2015)

A [similar criticism](#) has been directed at [a report on Aleppo by Physicians for Human Rights](#), which Widney Brown worked on. The report refers to the 'revolution' coming to Aleppo (p.5) as if it was something to applaud though, in 2012, American reporter James Foley, who embedded with rebels in Aleppo before ISIS executed him, had [indicated that Aleppo had no cause to welcome the 'revolution'](#). (In October 2012, when James Foley was in Aleppo, at least [three suicide bombings](#) for which the 'Free Syrian Army' claimed responsibility were carried out in the city.) None of the writers of the Physicians for Human Rights report visited Aleppo. Instead Physicians for Human Rights relied on interviews with 24 people in Turkey who supported the insurgents in east Aleppo and ignored health care workers such as [Dr Nabil Antaki](#), a gastroenterologist in Aleppo, who had cause to oppose the violence and agenda of insurgents.

Someone presented as a witness in 'The Road From Damascus' is Yacoub El Hillo, UN Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria. He met Mr Naanaa in Madaya when the UN aid convoy reached the town. There is no doubt the destitute and starving people Mr El Hillo saw were real, not fabricated, as he points out. However, he doesn't explain the circumstances behind the starvation nor does he lay blame. Some local people interviewed by an American reporter who travelled to Madaya [accuse rebels of hoarding food and pushing people out of their homes](#). However, *Australian Story* doesn't do any fact checking even when Mr Naanaa declares,

*In December we had no food left. We only had grass, but not even enough.*

Yet, he doesn't look gaunt or emaciated when the UN aid convoy arrives in January 2016, and if the population of Madaya is 40,000 (as he claims), the number of severely malnourished people we see in his clinic is unusually small.

As for Mr Sadri and Dr Ghanem, the ABC should be cautious when presenting the views of expatriate Syrians. Journalist [Charles Skelton noted in 2012](#) that

*...a number of key figures in the Syrian opposition movement are long-term exiles who were receiving US government funding to undermine the Assad government long before the Arab spring broke out.*

Some, if not many of these exiles, are linked to [the Muslim Brotherhood](#), whose ‘modus operandi’, according to [a 1982 US Defense Intelligence Agency report](#), ‘will continue to be terrorism, particularly bombings and assassination.’ This highlights the importance of the ABC’s being impartial and seeking a range of perspectives.

One of the key founders and financiers of The Syria Campaign is an expatriate Syrian who is CEO of a British oil and gas company. In an [article on The Syria Campaign](#), journalist Max Blumenthal presents The Syria Campaign as a group lobbying for war.

*Posing as a non-political solidarity organization, the Syria Campaign leverages local partners and media contacts to push the U.S. into toppling another Middle Eastern government.*

Also Dr Ghanem [returned to his hometown of Zabadani](#), very close to Madaya, to support rebels in 2012, which could indicate that the NGO on whose behalf he speaks is another partisan player pushing for the violent overthrow of the Syrian government.

For balance and a diversity of perspectives, *Australian Story* could have sought the views of expatriate Syrians who work for peace and reconciliation. For example, recently [Syrian Americans have written to US Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard](#) to express support for her ["Stop Arming Terrorists" bill \(HR 6504\)](#).

In ‘The Road From Damascus’, Joumana Naanaa, the wife of the main character in the program, explains,

*Before the war life in Damascus was very good. It was very safe, we could come and go as we please. We had almost everything, life was good.*

However, despite Mr Naanaa’s wife pointing out that life had been ‘very good’ in Damascus, Ms McNeill doesn’t ask the obvious question as to why Mr Naanaa then left his wife and young baby in Damascus to live in the ‘rebel-held’ town of Madaya. Ms McNeill must be aware of the car bombs, shootings, and assassinations committed by rebel groups at that time, yet *Australian Story* does not mention these atrocities or the responses of Syrians to them. (For evidence of some of these horrors, go [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#))

In an interview given around the same time that Mr Naanaa went to Madaya, prominent Syrian dissident [Haytham Manna](#) explained why he didn’t support anti-government violence. His view of the Syrian crisis is much more reasoned and sophisticated than that of Mr Naanaa and would resonate with many people in Australia who believe in peaceful political change. This is an excerpt from [The Current Impasse in Syria: Interview with Haytham Manna](#), June 30, 2012:

*There is no doubt that there are people with an agenda. This agenda is a right-wing agenda, whether Islamist or neoliberal. Its guiding principle is that the primary problem with Syria is its regional and international strategic location and political alliances. The idea here is that by changing Syria's alliances its problems will be solved. It would transform the Shi'i crescent to a Sunni pillar. Thus we have entered into sectarianism as a primary axis of social struggle in place of civilian rule as such an axis. We have thus also seen a struggle over Syria at the expense of change inside of Syria. Change has been compromised. Democracy as an idea is no longer mentioned. We have a real problem in terms of dealing with people. Freedom has become a slogan.*

Note, the [killing of soldiers and police started in the first week](#) of the crisis in Syria, and in the first month or two of the ‘Arab Spring’, [Al-Jazeera reporter Ali Hashem witnessed men with heavy weapons](#) crossing the Lebanese border into Syria, but Al-Jazeera would not allow him to report this. We don’t know if Mr Naanaa supported this violence at the start of the crisis, but if he did, it would call into question his beliefs and agenda.

Despite evidence that suggests the [vast majority of people in Damascus and most other Syrian cities oppose the militarized opposition](#), their voices are ignored by *Australian Story*. Such Syrians, like Haytham Manna referred to

above, may or may not support their current government, but are united in their opposition to the taking up of arms against their national army and police force, particularly when such violence is fueled by sectarian hatred. Some of their voices are available online. For example, please see the following links:

1. People of Aleppo from various faith backgrounds. See [SYRIA : Aleppo did NOT "fall". Aleppo was LIBERATED](#), 29 Dec 2016.
2. Women from the different faith backgrounds in Damascus. See ["Syriennes" - "Syrians"](#), December 2016.
3. Dr Nabil Antaki, a gastroenterologist who chose to stay in Aleppo. See [Syrian doctor describes daily struggles in regime-held west Aleppo](#), France 24, 24.11.2016; See also Video interview - [Syria: Dr. Nabil Antaki from Aleppo Demolishes Western Propaganda and Media Warmongering](#), 28 June 2016.
4. Jean-Clement Jeanbart, the Catholic Archbishop of Aleppo. See [France 24 interview with the Archbishop of Aleppo](#), Jan 2012.
5. Dr Abdul Azia Al Khair, a politician dissident forced underground for more than ten years. See ['Syria rebels just hostages in hands of allies'](#), Aug 2012.
6. Former rebels who accepted an amnesty from the Syrian government. See [The Babbila Reconciliation: a Light at the End of Syria's Dark Tunnel](#), Feb 2014.
7. The late Mohamad Rafea, a Palestinian Syrian actor abducted, tortured and killed by 'rebels'. See [Manufacturing Dissent – The Truth about Syria](#), Nov 2012. Mohamad Rafea speaking at the end of a rally in Damascus, October 2011, See [Syrian actor Mohamed Rafea talking about the Situation in Syria. 1/10/2011](#)
8. People at a pro-Assad rally in Damascus, January 11, 2012. See [Pro-Assad rally in Ummayyad Square, Damascus](#), Alakhbar News.
9. Alaa Ebrahim, a freelance journalist based in Damascus. See [Manufacturing Dissent – The Truth about Syria](#), Nov 2012.
10. Yara Abbas, a TV journalist killed by a sniper while returning from an assignment. See [Yara Abbas – in her own words](#), Mideast Shuffle, 31 May 2013.
11. Yara Saleh, a TV journalist abducted by rebels in 2012. See interview with Yara in [The hostages of the Free Syrian Army](#), August 2012.
12. Sculptor Mustafa Ali, based in Damascus, who manages a gallery that serves as a space for concerts. See [Syria's Leading Sculptor Keeps Creating In A Time Of Destruction](#), by Peter Kenyon, Nov 2016.
13. Kabreet - a Syrian Alternative/Indie-Rock band from Damascus Syria. See [Kabreet Band - Yalla Tnam \(Live At Gallery Mustafa Ali\)](#), 2016.
14. Students from the School of Architecture, Damascus University. See [Graduation 2014 | Damascus University - Faculty of Architecture](#), Sep 2014.

In 'The Road From Damascus', James Sadri from the Syria Campaign asserts,

*The uprising in Syria very rapidly escalated into hundreds of thousands of people on the streets, who were met with bullets from the Syrian regime.*

Yet *Australian Story* provides no documentary evidence of such huge 'opposition' rallies, while there is online video [evidence of huge pro-government rallies](#) in cities across Syria. People at such rallies included [outspoken women from different faith backgrounds](#). Ms McNeill would be aware that there is very little evidence of women supporting the male dominated 'revolution', which is sponsored by the Wahhabi states of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and other U.S. allies.

*Australian Story* avoids mentioning the sectarian element of the 'opposition' although this was a feature of the militarized opposition well before Mr Naanaa joined the rebels in Madaya. For example, in July 2011, Sheik Adnan Arour, a prominent Syrian cleric based in Saudi Arabia, threatened 'painful' punishment for those who stood against the 'revolution'. Referring to Alawites who take a stand for the government, Sheik Adnan exclaims,

[I swear we will chop them by mincing machine and we will feed their flesh to dogs.](#)

In May 2015, Faisal Qasim - the host of a popular Al-Jazeera program - and one of his guests [expressed support for the killing of Alawite women and children](#). There are reasons to fear such chilling sectarianism is becoming mainstream. The Christian Syrian guest on the program, who provided some semblance of balance, pointed out,

*A false narrative has been portrayed for five years now that this is Alawites vs non-Alawites but first of all the Alawites are not alone in the government or security forces. The representation is a natural mix of all the different sects in Syria.*

*Australian Story*, by not noting the sectarian hatred stirred up by the war in Syria, risks giving it legitimacy in Australia. Mostafa Mahamed, a Sydney preacher who travelled to Syria to join the armed group affiliated with al-Qaeda, has been described as [‘the highest-ranking terrorist Australia has produced’](#). He has been associated with Saudi cleric Abdullah al-Muhaysini who, in March 2015, supervised the forming of Jaish al-Fatah, the Army of Conquest, the umbrella group for most of the main rebel groups in Syria, including Ahrar al-Sham in control of the town in which Mr Naanaa went to live. In a discussion with Sheik Muhaysini, Australian preacher Mostafa Mahaded declares, “We will avenge our honour and yours, your martyrs and ours. Blood for blood and destruction for destruction.” Since the rebels were expelled from Aleppo, Sheik Muhaysini has declared that [‘jihad in Syria is obligatory for all able Muslims’](#) and for him Shi’a Muslims are the main target.

Ms McNeill might claim that neither she nor Mr Naanaa or other guests on *Australian Story* endorse the violence and sectarianism of the *takfiri* groups, as Dr Salt refers to them, and that they only support ‘moderate’ rebels. However, Peter Ford, British ambassador to Syria from 2003 to 2006 and now an outspoken critic of the UK government’s Syria policy, made the following statement [in an interview on SkyNews](#), Oct 2015:

*I realise it is not fashionable to point to the plight of Christians in the Middle East today but he (David Cameron) would have blood on his hands if Assad were to fall as the result of Western support for what Cameron amazingly called the ‘legitimate opposition’ to Assad.*

*Let us be clear here – we are talking about jihadis. Most of the opposition groups are jihadis; the so-called Free Syrian Army is just a footnote. If Assad were to fall – and the Russians thankfully realise this – it would be a disaster.*

The [British government is reportedly funding ‘rebel’ propaganda](#), which would inevitably compromise the integrity of BBC reporting on Syria. Already, the BBC’s integrity has been called into question by the [meticulous analysis of a 2013 BBC Panorama report](#) filmed in Syria. Despite Australia’s close ties with Britain, the ABC Code of Practice should ensure that the Standards in the Code are ‘applied in ways that maintain independence and integrity, preserve trust and do not unduly constrain journalistic enquiry’.

In February 2012, the ABC’s *The Drum* published an article by the Australian anthropologist Ms Fiona Hill, who has visited Syria many times over more than 30 years and lived there for extended periods. In this article, entitled *Syria’s ‘Arab Spring’: failed or hijacked?*, Ms Hill recounted the kidnapping of her adoptive Syrian nephew by opposition forces:

*The 18-year-old is in the first months of his obligatory military service and was returning back to his military posting after a short leave pass home, riding a civilian bus between a provincial town near his home and Damascus. The bus was stopped outside Homs by what appeared to be a security roadblock. Eight heavily armed men in military uniform boarded the bus and demanded that those serving in the military raise their hands. My nephew did so, along with a few others. They were taken off the bus, blindfolded, put in cars and driven away.*

*Two days later the kidnapers called the young man’s family, using his mobile phone, and berated them for letting their son ‘fight for Assad’ instead of fighting against the government and doing his Muslim duty. The family begged for mercy. The phone hung up. An excruciating six days later another call came advising that for a 500,000 Syrian Pound ransom (currently about \$8,000), they could collect him.*

*The heavily armed kidnappers had kept 18 captives in one room and provided food and bedding. Each day of his nine-day confinement, an imam had spoken to the detainees about religious duty. Ultimately my nephew, a Sunni Muslim, had been given four choices – fight with his captors against the government and kill as many police, soldiers, security agents, and non-Muslims (i.e. non-Sunnis) as possible; take ammunition supplied by them to destroy key infrastructure and wreak havoc; pay a substantial ransom; or be killed on the spot.*

More recently, in an article entitled [A Rain of Love](#) (Bass Coast Post, April 22, 2016), Dr Hill relates the extraordinary courage displayed by members of her Syrian family as they put their own lives at risk to save the lives of fellow Syrians.

*When the FSA first arrived in our district, my adoptive Syrian brother Thamer, as village leader, rescued three visiting Alawi families from inevitable summary murder by smuggling them out to safety. If discovered, he too would have been killed.*

The experiences of Dr Hill's Syrian adoptive family illustrate how complex and hard life is for Syrians today. Their story would inspire Australian Story viewers because it illustrates the compassion that some people can show toward their fellow human beings, regardless of religion or ethnicity, and is in stark contrast to the sectarian bigotry of the rebels.

It is understood that the ABC only accepts complaints within six weeks of a program being broadcast, but that in some circumstances it will consider complaints submitted after six weeks. We trust that the ABC will accept this complaint as the breaches of the Code are significant and they relate to matters that are highly contentious and that impact on Australia's national security and social harmony. As you can see, a considerable amount of research was required to prepare this letter. We trust your office will give the grave matters outlined here close attention.

Yours truly,

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(NB: 9 other people, including Syrians in Australia on humanitarian visas, signed the original letter sent to the Managing Director of the ABC.)



## LETTER TO AUSTRALIAN STORY FROM DR JEREMY SALT

November 23, 2016

Dear Sir/Ms,

I am writing with reference to the 'Australian Story' program, entitled 'The Road from Damascus', screened on November 21, 2016. The program dealt with the situation in the 'rebel-held' Syrian town of Madaya, not far from Damascus. The program succeeded in conveying the message of the suffering of civilians but even insofar as it went it lacked context and balance. The outside sources quoted included the Syrian American Medical Society and the Syria Campaign, both of which groups are aligned/embedded with 'rebel' forces in Syria. A third source was the US ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, a person whose extreme views on Syria are too well known to need recounting here.

The frequent references in the program to the 'regime' are consistent with mainstream media misrepresentation since the beginning of this conflict. Syria does not have a 'regime'. It has a government with voter support in presidential and parliamentary elections in recent years surpassing the percentage of voters who turned out for the recent American elections. Outside monitors from many countries confirm that these elections have been held fairly and without government intervention. The anti-government demonstrations to which your program refers were vastly outnumbered in 2012/2013 by the masses of people turning out in support of the government. Far from anti-government protests only turning violent because of the violence of the 'regime', as your program suggests, they were violent from their beginning in the southern city of Dara'a. Many police and soldiers were killed in the first weeks of this 'uprising' and while I have no firm evidence, it is my belief that the snipers firing into demonstrators, as mentioned by James Sadri, of the Syria Campaign, by implication government security forces, were in fact agents-provocateurs.

Sophie McNeill admits developing a close personal relationship with the main character in this Australian 'story', Khalid Nanaa. This clearly affected her ability to tell this story as it should have been told according to the standards of objective journalism. Mr Nanaa is presented as a well-meaning naif driven by good intentions and ending up providing medical assistance in the 'rebel-held' town of Madaya. The viewers were informed that 'only now' is he telling his story of 'everything that happened in Syria', which clearly he could not do, seeing that he was living either in Damascus or Madaya. This was sheer hyperbole. At one stage Mr Nanaa (a nurse and not a doctor) says he decided to treat any patient who came to see him in Madaya. His patients clearly included many children, but what we needed to know is whether he also treated wounded 'rebels.' My guess would be that he did, given that the 'rebels' control Madaya and would frequently be in need of medical services, but this question was not even asked. There is immediate sympathy for suffering children but what would have been the effect on viewers of seeing heavily bearded jihadists being treated by Mr Nanaa? The propaganda effect would certainly have been spoiled.

Your viewers were entitled to know who these loosely defined 'rebels' actually are, but Sophie McNeill did not take up this issue any more than she asked Mr Nanaa about his relationship with them. The answer to the question she did not ask about the 'rebels' holding Madaya is that they are members of one of the most violent takfiri/jihadist groups in Syria, Ahrar al Sham.

There is no shortage of detail about the background, the intentions and methods of this group. Your researchers could have turned to Nafeez Ahmed's article in Middle East Eye (October 16, 2015), 'Ahrar al Sham's Apocalyptic

Vision for Syria and Beyond'. Ahrar al Sham maintains a close working relationship with the recently rebranded Jabhat al Nusra (Al Qaida in Syria) and the Islamic State and is a central pillar of the extreme jihadist fighting coalition known as Jaish al Islam (Army of Islam). It has a long record of shocking atrocities to its name including, in May 2016, the massacre of Alawis, including women, children and old men, in the Homs governorate village of Al Zara; including, in March, 2015, the massacre of Christians in Idlib; including, in August, 2013, participation in genocidal attacks on Alawi villagers in Latakia province, with an assortment of takfiri groups massacring upwards of 200 villagers and abducting dozens more.

While an estimated 20 groups took part in this slaughter, the US organisation, Human Rights Watch, named Ahrar al Sham as one of five groups, including Jabhat al Nusra and the Islamic State, that were the key fundraisers, organisers, planners and executors of the attack (see the HRW report, October 10, 2013, 'You Can Still See Their Blood'. Executions, indiscriminate shootings and hostage-taking by opposition forces in Latakia'). On May 13, 2016, Amnesty International included Ahrar al Sham among takfiri/jihadist groups responsible for 'repeated indiscriminate attacks' that may amount to war crimes in northern Syria, along with allegations that it has used chemical weapons. Yet the head of Ahrar al Sham in Madaya believes that it is 'the best group to bring justice to Syria.'

Ahrar al Sham has been accused of hoarding food and profiteering in Madaya. Whether or not these accusations are true, it is certainly not true, but in fact a slander, that the civilian population is being intentionally starved to death by the Syrian government, as one speaker in your program claims. The provision of supplies to Madaya has depended on the outcome of negotiations between the government, UN mediators and Ahrar al Sham and does not depend solely on decisions taken by the government in Damascus. It is the difficulty of getting all parties to agree on the opening of a humanitarian corridor that has repeatedly stalled the supply of food to the civilian population of Madaya.

Like eastern Aleppo, Madaya is held by a thoroughly murderous sectarian group armed and financed by outside governments, including the government of Saudi Arabia, one of the most reactionary regimes - a true regime - in the world, which is concurrently running another war, against the Shia population of Yemen. Ahrar al Sham's enemy is not just the Syrian government or the Shia and Alawi it has massacred but Christians and Sunni Muslims who do not conform to its murderous ideology, which differs from the Islamic State's only on minor points of theological detail.

The suffering of the civilians of Madaya is terrible but it is the armed men who have infiltrated their town who bear the first responsibility for their plight. No government in the world could allow a situation to continue in which a terrorist group is holding a civilian population hostage. This is the reality of Madaya. Knowing the essential facts there is surely no Australian watching your 'Australian Story' who could regard a group like Ahrar al Sham with anything other than abhorrence yet in your report on Madaya this group is not even mentioned. Neither is there any attempt to question Mr Nanaa about his dealings with this group and possibly his affinity with its ideology. It is certain that he could not have operated in Madaya without its support and without at least appearing to support its aims, The outcome is a report that is superficially heart-warming but is by no means the true story of what lies behind the 'siege' of Madaya.

Yours sincerely,

Jeremy Salt