



Susan Dirgham &lt;susan.dirgham51@gmail.com&gt;

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**RE: Re Syria: Breaching Codes related to Accuracy, Impartiality, and Diversity of Perspectives**

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ABC Corporate\_Affairs11 <CORPORATE\_AFFAIRS11.ABC@abc.net.au>  
To: "Susan.dirgham51@gmail.com" <Susan.dirgham51@gmail.com>

18 November 2019 at 15:33

Dear Ms Dirgham,

Thank you for your email regarding the 16 October of *The Minefield* which featured a discussion with Waleed Aly, Scott Stephens and Nader Hashemi in which they considered whether the US has 'betrayed' its allies.

In accordance with the ABC's complaints handling procedures, your concerns have been considered by Audience and Consumer Affairs, a unit that is separate to and independent from the content making areas of the ABC. Our role is to review and, where appropriate, investigate complaints alleging that ABC content has breached the ABC's editorial standards. The ABC's editorial standards can be found here: <https://edpols.abc.net.au/>

Please note, as has been explained in our previous correspondence, Audience and Consumer Affairs can only review clear and specific complaints about ABC content which relates directly to the ABC's editorial standards.

Your complaint makes unsupported claims around impartiality and diversity of perspectives; we have not addressed these general statements in our investigation. The ABC's requirements for accuracy are more pertinent to the issues you raise, and we have therefore assessed each specific broadcast you identify against the relevant standards:

2.1 Make reasonable efforts to ensure that material facts are accurate and presented in context.

2.2 Do not present factual content in a way that will materially mislead the audience. In some cases, this may require appropriate labels or other explanatory information.

As noted by the program makers: "The discussion focussed on the US president Donald Trump's withdrawal of military presence and material support to the predominantly Kurdish militia that had been instrumental in the reclamation of large swathes of land from the Islamic State in north and north-eastern Syria. Our precise question was the moral status or illicitness of that act of (what had widely been described as a) "betrayal". As an ancillary to that discussion, it became necessary for us to speak about: (a) the broader obligations that the United States has in and to that region, (b) whether the land held by the predominantly Kurdish forces, with US support, could only ever be a temporary and largely untenable placeholder, and (c) whether there is a "way out" for US forces, or is some ongoing military presence in Syria necessary. A subtheme in the discussion is whether the Kurds were 'natural' or 'appropriate' allies of the United States, given the untenability of any alliance with the Assad government."

The program was not intended to be nor was it established as a discussion about the complexities of the ongoing Syrian war. The focus was specifically on the withdrawal of US presence and a discussion about the moral and ethical complications within the tactical decisions.

Within this context, according to the program, when “Nader Hashemi joined the conversation, as a world-renowned specialist on Syria and on the politics of the Middle East, he thought it important to get additional clarity about how it was, and what political mistakes and exigencies made it necessary, for the land in northern Syria to be held the way it was. Our primary topic was not the Syrian government or the conduct of Bashar al Assad. Moreover, The Minefield is not a current affairs or news program – our purview is moral and political philosophy. So, our primary evaluation was directed at the conduct of Western governments – and, indeed, we devoted more attention to Turkey under Erdogan than we did Assad.”

Nader Hashemi is a recognised specialist and was offering his view on what a ‘better’ president might have done with regards to Syria noting that the actions taken by the Obama administration lead to many significant consequences which have impacted many people over the world. Professor Hashemi briefly outlined the considerations that, in his view, would have been relevant to a president in considering what actions to take regarding Syria.

While we have noted your personal interpretation of the events and your assertion that the program did not provide a detailed enough summary, it was reasonable for the program to rely on Professor Hashemi’s acknowledged expertise first in outlining the considerations he believed a president would have to contemplate in the hypothetical he had set up and second, in contrasting that theoretical response with the actions actually taken by Barack Obama.

We are further satisfied that Professor Hashemi was appropriately qualified to make an assessment that the actions undertaken amount to ‘borderline genocide’. The program has further noted: “Professor Hashemi has particular expertise in the role of authoritarian governments in fomenting and promulgating ethnic cum religious violence against minorities and rival groups.” While you may disagree with Professor Hashemi’s assessment, Audience and Consumer Affairs are satisfied that it was appropriate for Professor Hashemi to offer his informed analysis within the context of the hypothetical he was presenting and the summary of events he thought were relevant to consider.

We have noted your assertion that “it is left to the ABC audience to assume the Syrian government is committing “genocide” against Sunni Muslims, but this is a claim that needs support since the government and Army are made up of all religious groups; the majority would be Sunnis’. However we note that notwithstanding your assumptions, Professor Hashemi does not discuss Sunni Muslims nor does he discuss the religious composition of the Army.

Similarly, we have noted your reference to Al Jazeera Arabic and to Alwaites, however, it is unclear what the relevance of this is to this ABC content which does not discuss Alwaites.

We have noted your objection to the statistics used by Professor Hashemi, again as globally recognised specialist it was appropriate for the program to rely on his expertise on the situation including his knowledge of scholarship in the area and his assessment of the veracity or applicability of counterclaims. We further note, according to the United Nations there are approximately 5.7 million registered Syrian refugees and approximately 6.6 million internally displaced people (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>; <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>).

We have noted your views that the chemical attack has been disputed by some, however, again, the discussion was specifically in the context of the Obama Administration’s response to the widely reported and internationally verified use of chemical weapons. We specifically note that the United Nations report stated: “In particular, the

environmental, chemical and medical samples we have collected provide clear and convincing evidence that surface-to-surface rockets containing the nerve agent Sarin were used in Ein Tarma, Moadamiyah and Zamalka in the Ghouta area of Damascus." <https://undocs.org/A/67/997>

While you may personally disagree with the findings of the United Nations, Audience and Consumer Affairs remain satisfied that within the context of this discussion it was not materially misleading for Professor Hashemi to reference "the pivotal moment in the summer of 2013 when there was a massive chemical weapons attack in the suburbs of Damascus."

We have noted your unsubstantiated assumption that 'Aly has an idealistic belief in a 'moral' Caliphate (not a state) made up of Arabic-speaking Muslim majority countries'. It is unclear how you have drawn this conclusion from the program. Waleed Aly was quite clearly discussing the Westphalian system of state sovereignty and considered whether there are moral obligations placed on nations like the United States beyond their own national interest. Waleed Aly made no assertions about a Caliphate or of any other possible system of governance.

Having reviewed the discussion, Audience and Consumer Affairs are satisfied that the content complied with the ABC's editorial standards for accuracy. Nevertheless, your interpretation of the content and views have been noted by our unit and the program team.

Should you be dissatisfied with this response, you may be able to pursue your complaint with the Australian Communications and Media Authority ([www.acma.gov.au](http://www.acma.gov.au)).

Yours sincerely,

Reena Rihan

Audience and Consumer Affairs

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To: Audience & Consumer Affairs

From: Susan Dirgham ([susan.dirgham51@gmail.com](mailto:susan.dirgham51@gmail.com))

Subject: Re Syria: Breaching Codes related to Accuracy, Impartiality, and Diversity of Perspectives

Date: 19-Oct-2019 15:19

Below is the result of your feedback form. It was submitted by Susan Dirgham ([susan.dirgham51@gmail.com](mailto:susan.dirgham51@gmail.com))

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ABC program: The Minefield

Response required: Yes

Date of program: 16-Oct-2019

Contact type: Complaint

Location: VIC

Subject: Re Syria: Breaching Codes related to Accuracy, Impartiality, and Diversity of Perspectives

Comments: In this 'The Minefield' program, presenters Waleed Aly and Scott Stephens discuss Syria with Nader Hashemi, from the University of Denver.

When introducing Hashemi, Stephens expresses great respect for his expertise. Many might also view Waleed Aly, with a PhD in global terrorism, as an 'expert' on terror and Syria.

ABC listeners would expect Hashemi and Aly to be objective and analytical while referencing a range of perspectives. However, Hashemi presents unsubstantiated and highly contested claims about the background to the Syrian war which neither Aly nor Stephens question.

Breaches of ABC Standards

The program breaches ABC standards related to Accuracy, Impartiality and Diversity of Perspectives.

The presenters of 'The Minefield':

- do not make a reasonable effort to ensure that material facts presented are accurate
- accept content presented as fact that will materially mislead the audience
- do not present information with due impartiality
- do not present a range of perspectives (e.g. they ignore the perspective of the victims of

insurgents and Syrian women who value the personal freedoms a secular state guarantees them).

Aly's confidence in his breaching of ABC standards, I contend, reflects a systemic bias in the ABC's presentation of information and views on Syria which is both contrary to the ABC Code of Practice and to the inclusive and compassionate values Australians are taught to espouse.

## 1. The Placement of Blame

Hashemi places blame for "events that began in 2011" and the resultant catastrophe on "the horrific response pursued by Bashar Al-Assad and his regional allies, Iran and ..... Russia".

In not challenging Hashemi's claims, the presenters of 'Minefield' ignore the complexity of the war in Syria. For example, they ignore:

- the fact that soldiers, police, public servants, and minorities were targeted by anti-government forces from the start of the 'Arab Spring'
- the violence and terror committed by tens of thousands of foreign insurgents
- the covert nature of the US-led 'regime change' war against Syria
- the schism between Sunni Muslims in Syria who (particularly women) maintain support for the secular state institutions and Sunni Muslims (mostly men) outside Syria who respond to fatwas of clerics, such as Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood cleric Sheik Yusuf Qaradawi and Saudi Salafi cleric Abdullah al-Muhaysini, who have promoted violence against the 'heretical' Syrian 'regime'
- the objective and rigorous analyses by academics, investigative journalists, and scientists that challenge the one-dimensional views presented in this program.

## 2. "A Borderline Genocide"

In the program Hashemi infers that Bashar Al-Assad and his allies have been responsible for what he refers to as a "borderline genocide". He does not explain what this means or provide support for such a claim. Thus, he makes a generic and gratuitous accusation against the Syrian president and, by extension, the government and national army.

It is left to the ABC audience to assume the Syrian government is committing "genocide" against Sunni Muslims, but this is a claim that needs support since the government and Army are made up of all religious groups; the majority would be Sunnis. The army could not remain a strong, united fighting force if it were committing a 'borderline genocide' against Sunnis, the dominant religious

group in Syria.

Moreover, it has been documented that one of the slogans from the start of the 'Arab Spring' was 'Christians to Beirut; Alawites to the grave'. Such hatred expressed toward Alawites has been reflected on the ground in Syria. In August 2013, 20 anti-government armed groups attacked Alawite villages in Latakia and massacred close to 200 people (mostly women and children), abducting about the same number.

Genocidal hatred for Alawites has been unashamedly promoted on Al-Jazeera (Ref: 'Aljazeera Arabic: Should we kill all Alawites?', 2015)

3. "(Assad's) killed half a million people"

This statement does not reflect objective scholarship.

Neither Hashemi nor Aly provide an analysis of the casualty figures or give thought to the victims of terror. (Some reports estimate that over 60,000 foreign insurgents and around 100,00 Syrian soldiers have been killed in the war. How many out-of-uniform 'rebels' were counted as civilian casualties?)

Other than ISIS, they make no mention of terrorist groups, such as Jabhat Al-Nusra, an Al-Qaeda affiliate responsible for many deadly car and suicide bombings. (NB: In a 2014 interview on The World Today Deakin University's Greg Barton expressed support for air attacks against Al-Nusra: 'US says airstrikes in Syria have helped to foil terrorist attack against west'. However, I can't find condemnation of Al-Nusra by Aly.)

Hashemi and Aly do not mention the thousands of people killed by missiles fired into residential areas by 'rebels'. (e.g. a 'rebel' mortar reportedly killed 15 Damascus University students in 2013.)

They do not mention the fact that the Syrian army, the business elite, and the government reflect the demographic nature of the society. (For example, the president's intelligence advisor Ali Mamlouk is a Sunni Muslim as is Syria's Foreign Affairs Minister Walid Muallem.)

It can be assumed the Sunni Syrian majority would not countenance government policies that were NOT directed at

1. the protection of the general population from the terror and violence of the foreign-backed insurgents,
2. the maintenance of state institutions, such as the army, emergency forces, schools and universities,

3. overall stability in the country so as to attract investment and so improve economic and business opportunities and the standard of living,
4. the de-radicalisation of Syrians attracted to radical political Islam; reconciliation and peace.

4. "(Assad's) displaced 11 million people, half of them refugees"

When Hashemi makes this bold claim, there is no support or analysis provided and Aly doesn't challenge it. But the majority of displaced Syrians live in government held cities and towns. Hashemi and Aly do not acknowledge the impact the violence of the various insurgent groups had on populations. Yet, many Syrians came to Australia on humanitarian visas to escape their terror. (A current exhibition at Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance presents the story of a couple forced to leave their hometown after war came to their town and insurgents fired missiles randomly into their area. Their children lived in daily fear for their lives.)

5. The alleged chemical attack and Obama's 'red line'

Hashemi refers to a "massive chemical weapons attack on the suburbs of Damascus". Aly refers to it as the "red line incident". It occurred on 21 August 2013 and was allegedly a 'sarin gas attack'. However, neither Hashemi nor Aly alert the ABC audience to the fact that highly esteemed scientists (such as Prof Ted Postol at MIT) and investigative journalists (e.g. Seymour Hersh and Robert Parry) have presented strong evidence that points to foreign funded insurgents staging an attack and presenting bodies, many of them children, to provoke US-led military strikes against Syria. The late Dr Denis O'Brien, a retired lawyer with a PhD in neuropharmacology, wrote a 288-page report on the 'sarin' attack. He maintained the victims were not killed by sarin, but displayed symptoms that pointed to either carbon monoxide or cyanide gas poisoning. He pointed out that these gases cannot be used in chemical weapons, as sarin can. Dr O'Brien contended that one or other of these deadly gases was released from cylinders that he noticed in the rooms with victims.

According to investigative journalist Robert Parry, Obama was warned that 'the evidence against Assad was not a slam dunk'.

Possible ramifications of such biased accounts of the Syrian war

Such an crude damning of the Syrian president, government, army, and Syria's allies and implied support for insurgents in Syria can contribute to:

- the radicalisation of some within the Australian Sunni community,
- tensions between different sections of the Australian community that could result in violence,

- Australians in general being so ill-informed about Syria that they unwittingly condone harsh and possibly illegal US-led Coalition actions that negatively impact the general public in Syria (e.g. in terms of sanctions and ongoing military activity)

- Australian policy makers making decisions about the deployment of Australian Defence Force personnel in Syria which are ill-advised.

ABC listeners who are widely read on the war in Syria would know there is a strong body of evidence, scholarship and investigative work that call into question Hashemi's and Aly's views.

Why Aly displays such a lack of scholarship and a seeming disregard for Syrians who remain loyal to the nation state is hinted at in the program. He infers he doesn't believe the nation state can "behave as a moral agent". I suspect, like prominent UK activist Moazzam Begg (Ref: Begg's May 2012 interview with Julian Assange) Aly has an idealistic belief in a 'moral' Caliphate (not a state) made up of Arabic-speaking Muslim majority countries.

This could explain Aly's breaching of ABC Codes. But, as I have contended, this program points to a systemic breaching of ABC Standards in programs that present discussions on Syria.

May the ABC Codes ensure individuals contribute to the common good within our flawed nation state by adhering to the Code's agreed set of principles and standards.

Network - Radio National

RecipientName - Audience & Consumer Affairs

Referrer - Complaint

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