



Before becoming a White Helmet in 2013, Jihad Mahameed was an accounts manager at a bank in southern Syria.

“There’s no way this should have worked”

More than 100 White Helmets and their family members made it out of Syria thanks to a dramatic rescue operation led by Canada. **Sally Armstrong** travels to the Middle East to get the inside story.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER BREGG

PUBLISHED IN CO-OPERATION WITH READER’S DIGEST



It was black as pitch on the Syrian side of the border and floodlit on the Israeli side when the curtain rose on a dramatic rescue. Out of the darkness in the Golan Heights, they came — the famed White Helmets — the bankers and barbers and ordinary citizens known around the world for their courage.

Over the course of Syria's seven-year civil war, these volunteer rescue workers had braved barrel bombing and chemical attacks to save more than 114,000 citizens who dared oppose President Bashar al-Assad. Singled out for torture and death by the regime, they came — exhausted and frightened, walking with their families up the grassy slope of Syria toward the forbidden border with Israel.

Shortly after 9 p.m. on July 21, 2018, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) gave the order: "Now." The metal gate separating the two enemy countries cranked open. That night, 422 lives were saved.

"Canada played the leading role in an absolutely extraordinary international rescue operation that came together in a frenetic three-week period," says James Le Mesurier, founder of Mayday Rescue. (A not-for-profit foundation based in Jordan and Turkey, it assists the White Helmets — officially known as Syria Civil Defense — with training and development.)

In one exemplary initiative, leaders from half a dozen countries set egos and differences aside; humanity became the driving force and the inspiration. "We witnessed the heart and core of Canada," says Deborah Lyons, Canada's ambassador to Israel. Her counterpart in Jordan, Peter MacDougall, says of all the files he's covered in his diplomatic career, "This is number one." And Major Efi Ribner of the IDF says, "We didn't flinch even for a second when asked to save these people. This is one of the most significant things I've done in my military career. I'm very, very proud to have been part of it."

But first, the background. In the fall of 2012, Assad's government began attacking villages, towns and cities, such as Aleppo, Homs and the suburbs of Damascus, that were against his regime. His claim: any opposition to his autocratic rule was an act of terrorism. He withdrew all ambulance, fire and rescue services from areas that were not under Syrian government control. The people were left helpless: as bombs fell, there was no one to put out fires or rescue people trapped in the rubble. And when the attacks ended, there was no one to restart the electricity, reconnect water services or repair bridges.

That's when groups of ordinary Syrians — first in Aleppo and Idlib and later throughout the rebel-held areas — united



"[The White Helmets] became the hope and inspiration to millions of Syrians being affected by the civil war," says James Le Mesurier of Mayday Rescue, who is pictured here with colleague Nadera Al-Sukkar.

to respond. Like a high-octane neighbourhood watch, they gained experience in firefighting, rescue, trauma care and crisis management. And because they donned white construction helmets before going to a rescue, they came to be called the White Helmets.

After receiving training help from Mayday Rescue and funding from Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States, Japan and the Netherlands, what began as a civil defence force had, by 2014, morphed into a movement of 4,200 volunteers working in approximately 150 rebel towns, villages and cities.

Whenever rockets strike or bombs fall, the White Helmets dig people out of the rubble, put out fires and run ambulance operations. Later, they clear debris from the streets, rebuild bridges and reconnect water and electrical



services. “They became the hope and inspiration to millions of Syrians being affected by the civil war,” says Le Mesurier.

One volunteer who escaped with his life before the threat from Assad is Jihad Mahameed, 51. A former accounts manager at a bank in Daraa, in southern Syria, he’s an easygoing father of two, with a friendly smile and a bitter understanding of the tactics the regime used against the people in his community. “I was the first employee dismissed from the bank because I was against the government,” he says.

He remembers the night in January 2013 when he became a White Helmet: “Our neighbourhood was hit with bombs. A woman was crying. She was injured; couldn’t find her baby. She was sure her baby was dead under the rubble.” Mahameed and his friends took the woman to the hospital and ran back to the site of the bombing and began digging. “We found the baby, covered in dust, sitting in a corner of the building looking like she didn’t know what happened.” Mahameed reached her, tucked her into

his arms and brought her out of the rubble. “She was terrified; she had a small injury to her ear and held on to me so tight, and she wouldn’t let go of me. The doctor treated her ear — she still held on to me. Then I took her to her mother, and she let go. It was my first rescue.”

His colleague Farouq Habib, 37, is the White Helmets’ support-unit director — the liaison between the group and Mayday Rescue. Before the bloodbath by Assad’s forces left almost 18,000 dead across the country, he was an investment banker in Homs. Like Mahameed, he was arrested, jailed and tortured by the regime. Like Mahameed, he doesn’t talk about that. Instead, with his piercing eyes blazing, Habib talks about rescue. “When the bombs explode, some people run to escape, others run to help. . . . [The White Helmets] drop everything and focus only on the rescue operation.”

Habib saw his house destroyed and his family displaced. After leaving prison, he was told to get out of Syria. From

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his new temporary home in Amman, Jordan, he thinks back on the evacuation of the White Helmets at the Golan Heights and says, "We didn't aim at being refugees and leaving our country. We were looking to live in peace and dignity in our hometowns."

The White Helmets soon became heroes. They also became the public enemy of Bashar al-Assad, in part because they were keeping people alive despite his bombardments, but also because they attached cameras to their helmets to record the chemical attacks and barrel bombings, gathering evidence of war crimes. In retaliation, as areas fell to the regime, amnesty was offered to all but the White Helmets.

"All flavours of armed groups were eligible for reconciliation and for movement to other parts of Syria," Le Mesurier says, but not the White Helmets. "Even a member of al-Qaeda would be able to be moved from one of these areas to another part of Syria [the government controlled], but movement and reconciliation were not open to the White Helmets. They were singled out, taken off buses, put into regime detention facilities. They were tortured, terrorized and forced to make video confessions alleging that they had been responsible for conducting atrocities. Some White Helmets were referred to as 'vermin that should be eradicated.'"

They were also subjected to "double-tap" operations: the regime would bomb an area, and when the White Helmets rushed in, a second bombardment would target the rescuers. But the worst assault came after the fall of the rebel-held areas in the south. Residents were told they had to fill out reconciliation forms, pledge their allegiance to Assad and identify terrorists, mass graves and White Helmets. The fear among the men and women who had been rescuing civilians throughout the seven-year civil war was that they would be arrested, tortured and disappeared. With 255 of their volunteers already dead and more than 700 wounded, the risk to the rest of the first responders was extraordinary.

That's when Canada got involved.

June 28, Amman, Jordan: The Syrian government had shifted its guns to the south. It was only a matter of time before they fully controlled the southern part of Syria. Nadera Al-Sukkar, Syrian country manager for Mayday Rescue, went to update the Canadian ambassador, Peter MacDougall, on the situation. She said they needed assistance in evacuating some of the White Helmets.

"I could see in her face the look of despair, even panic," remembers MacDougall. He immediately got on the phone to his colleagues in Ottawa who are responsible for Syria and reminded them that the ground game was changing every day and sometimes every hour.

In the beginning, the rescue operation was driven by people in the field such as Robin Wettlaufer, the head of political affairs for Syria. She became Canada's face in Syria in March 2014, when she was appointed as special

envoy. Located in Istanbul, she's been working with the White Helmets — arranging funding, training and support — for more than four years. She knew their extraordinary organization and the courage they showed. "Robin played a tremendous role in the rescue," says MacDougall.

July 3, Istanbul, Turkey: "Is there anything Canada can do to help us?" Ra'ed Saleh, the leader of the White Helmets, was meeting with Wettlaufer to let her know that the regime was advancing faster than anticipated and that his people were in trouble. He had thought the targeted men and women would have months to organize an escape route. In reality, they had weeks, maybe even days. Wettlaufer shared his concern — she understood well the trajectory of the Assad government and how it pursues territory.

And so Wettlaufer began working with Saleh and Mayday Rescue to draw up a list of White Helmets most in danger: the leaders, the female members and the ones featured prominently in the media. Those names were marked for evacuation.

Saleh and Wettlaufer also discussed the internationals who work with the White Helmets: Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany and other donors. They knew similar conversations were taking place in Amman with Peter MacDougall and other embassy officials. While the way forward was not clear and resettling the White Helmets was not part of the initial thinking, Wettlaufer says, "It became obvious that there was nowhere safe for them to go."

She dispatched an urgent report to Global Affairs Canada in Ottawa, stating that there was a very real risk that those White Helmets could be detained, disappeared or killed — it had happened before in Eastern Ghouta and in Aleppo. "There were a couple of cases of White Helmets being detained and subsequently appearing in videos produced by the regime, confessing to their crimes. We know this was under obvious duress."

She felt very strongly that Canada was obliged to keep them safe. "We had funded them. We had worked closely with them. And we knew just how incredible their work had been. We knew how much Syrians rely on them."

The response to her message was swift. "Senior officials in Ottawa recognized the danger immediately and that we had a moral obligation to try and do everything we could for them."

She emphasizes that the discussion wasn't immediately about resettlement, which is a very delicate issue everywhere. Jordan already has more than 750,000 refugees from the war in Syria. Turkey doesn't want more either. And the countries supporting the White Helmets had already taken in their quotas. Canada, for instance, has welcomed 58,600 Syrian refugees since November 2015. But Wettlaufer says, "We concluded very quickly that we could do little to protect them if they remained in Syria. Something else had to be done."

In the meantime, the threatened White Helmets were on the run, moving away from their homes in rebel-held areas,

OPPOSITE: "We didn't aim at being refugees and leaving our country," says Farouq Habib, 37, of the White Helmets.





finding safe routes to the borders where a rescue might happen, concealing their identities, counting on strangers for clandestine help and staying in touch with their colleagues at Mayday Rescue through coded WhatsApp and text messages.

July 11, Brussels, Belgium: At the NATO foreign ministers' summit in Brussels, Chrystia Freeland, Canada's minister of foreign affairs, stood up at a dinner event and, according to Wettlaufer, pounded the table while she made an impassioned plea to the foreign ministers. "We have to do something. We cannot leave the White Helmets behind. We have a moral obligation to these people."

If a deal was struck, it had to include resettlement. The United Kingdom, Germany and France immediately responded to Freeland's plea.

While the Brussels meeting galvanized the diplomats, politicians and aid workers involved, time was running out. The tempo picked up, and the Mayday Rescue staff started preparing operations for the plan that would follow.

There was still much to sort out, says Wettlaufer. "How were we actually going to do this? What are the logistics required? Which countries are on board? What do we need them to do? High-level diplomacy on the part of the Canadian government and the American State Department was essential in reaching out to people in the region and engaging the UN in discussions to figure out exactly how this could work."

The clock was ticking. Phone calls, WhatsApp messages and coded emails were connecting the dots of the rescue plan 24-7. The regime's advancing army had closed off the border to Jordan, leaving the Golan Heights as the only crossing point available, which meant Israel had to agree to let them in. Jordan had to sign off on receiving the rescued men, women and children from Israel, even if only for a short stay. Buses to take the White Helmets from Israel to Jordan had to be organized. Meanwhile, Assad's regime was closing off access routes from the south to the Israeli border. And, as if the stars refused to align, ISIS started its own scrap for a piece of land that cut off access from the south.

According to Anthony Hinton, the deputy head of mission at the Canadian Embassy in Israel, the next steps to secure the Golan Heights crossing included engaging with the Israelis at a number of different levels. Even Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau got involved, asking Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for direct Israeli assistance. "This is a pretty sensitive issue, as you can imagine," says Hinton. "There was willingness to help right away. The first thing the Israelis needed to know was exactly the scope of the problem; it was immense. But once that was established, they went to work brainstorming and looking at different options. Israel was absolutely indispensable."

OPPOSITE: "I saw frightened, nervous people who approached the Israeli-Syrian border carefully, not really knowing where to go," remembers Major Efi Ribner of the Israeli Defense Forces about the moment the White Helmets crossed over with their families.

WHITE HELMETS WERE ON THE RUN, MOVING AWAY FROM THEIR HOMES IN REBEL- HELD AREAS.

Deborah Lyons adds, "Very much to their credit, the Israeli government and military put human life ahead of politics and said, 'We are there to help the White Helmets and to work with the rest of the coalition to get them out safely.'"

Now they were in a race against time.

July 19, Amman, Jordan:

The Mayday Rescue team sent a coded message by text and WhatsApp to the White Helmets: Head to the border with Israel.

The instruction seemed counter-intuitive — Israel was an enemy border. But it was the only option available, so the first responders began moving from dozens of locations toward the Golan Heights.

Canadian and Israeli officials then worked to get identification documents for each of the vulnerable White Helmets from the Mayday Rescue office in Amman and to finish the vetting so the evacuation would go off without a hitch.

July 21, Golan Heights: Here on this scrubby patch of land, the stage was set for a rescue that would add to the history of the storied Golan Heights. Occupied by Israel since the 1967 Six-Day War and tucked between two mountain ranges in the Valley of Tears, the Golan Heights is the de facto border between Israel and Syria. Here, neighbours who have become enemies watch each other from vantage points scattered about these hills in the Holy Land. But on this night, the border will open briefly.

The plan was to unlock the gate, receive the White Helmets, process them and get them onto buses bound for Jordan pronto. Representatives of the Jordanian government were there to observe the evacuation, as were UN officials. Mayday Rescue had sent two White Helmet members, Farouq Habib and Jihad Mahameed, each with a satellite phone so the partners could be in touch throughout the evacuation.

The anxiety level at the Mayday Rescue office in Amman, the Canadian Embassy in Tel Aviv and the foreign affairs office in Ottawa was palpable. So many things could go wrong. The regime's military could catch wind of the top-secret rescue, charge the border and attack. Assad could call for an airstrike. Syrian citizens living nearby could also seize the opportunity to cross through the border when it opened, prompting a military response from the Israelis.

"Any single one of those things would have meant we had to stop the operation," says Wettlaufer. "This was our only shot. We had one last day to make it happen. We were incredibly worried, incredibly stressed." The worst part was knowing that "something bad could happen to the White Helmets in the course of the evacuation."

The IDF's Major Efi Ribner says, "We take our security very seriously; there are many different terrorist organizations on the other side who are not particularly fond of the state of Israel, who could take advantage of the situation to attack us or the Syrians who are trying to come across." ▶



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an exceptional moment,” Habib recalls. “I had mixed feelings — sadness because this family was forced to leave the homeland but happy because we rescued them. They had a baby — a two- or three-year-old. I hugged the baby. It made me think of my own son, a one-year-old. I felt that all those children out there waiting with their parents were like my son. The mother was crying, so was the father. Then all three of us were crying. I couldn’t believe it was happening.”

The families were in miserable condition: some sick, some barefoot, many without enough clothes for this unusually cold night. One mother asked if Habib could get baby milk for her child. A man begged Habib to negotiate safe passage for his wife and children, left behind. There was also a newborn baby, delivered only two

days earlier while the family walked to the Golan Heights.

The rescued families rushed to Mahameed, embraced him, asking questions, seeking answers. He hugged them back but discouraged them from lingering. “I kept checking names off my list and moved them along quickly. I was afraid something could go wrong. I just wanted them safely on the bus.”

Weeks later, Ribner was asked to share the story behind a photo of himself holding one of the White Helmets’ swaddled infants. “The baby’s mother had left her ID at the checkpoint. She put the baby on the registration table and rushed back to retrieve her documents. The baby was crying, so I carried the child with me until the mother came back.”

The IDF had doctors, medics and ambulances standing by in case anyone needed medical attention. But no one asked for help. As each family cleared security, they were moved to buses where blankets, food, baby formula and water awaited them. When all 10 buses were filled, they left in a convoy for the Jordanian border.

In Amman, the Mayday Rescue office was crowded with envoys, ambassadors, aid workers and UN refugee staff, all of them working the phones, checking WhatsApp, maintaining close contact with their offices and waiting for news from Habib and Mahameed. The room was a cloud of cigarette smoke, reeking of strong coffee and stuffed with anxiety. “At that point, I can tell you everyone was just incredibly nervous, not sure whether or not it would actually happen,” says Wettlaufer.

Shortly after 9 p.m. — half an hour later than anticipated — the call came from Habib. The White Helmets had started to cross.

“As the night progressed and people were getting across the border and one by one they were getting on buses, it became clear — this just might work,” says Wettlaufer. “But

“[The rescue] had about a two percent chance of success,” says Robin Wettlaufer, the head of Canada’s political affairs for Syria. “It was mission impossible.”

The IDF had co-ordinated the time and place where the White Helmets would come across the border with the Canadian Embassy and the Mayday Rescue team. Just before sundown, the IDF deployed in full battle gear, with camouflage branches draped on helmets and machine guns shouldered. They set up a table where each evacuee would be identified. When the sky was fully dark, the order was given to open the gate. As it cranked slowly to a position that exposed the Syrian hills, everyone stared into the night. For a minute, it was like there was a hush over the land. Then Ribner called the White Helmets to come forward as families, one group at a time. If some were on their own, they were told to approach as individuals. The control was tight.

Except for gunfire in the distance — likely the sound of ISIS grabbing territory — the night was eerily quiet. The White Helmets moved toward the gate. “I saw frightened, nervous people who approached the Israeli-Syrian border carefully, not really knowing where to go or how to conduct themselves,” remembers Major Ribner. “We had people who speak Arabic waiting for them to give them a sense that it’s safe and that they can approach.”

Habib and Mahameed were the first familiar faces the White Helmets saw. “When the first family crossed, it was



"We witnessed the heart and core of Canada," says Deborah Lyons, ambassador to Israel, of the rescue.

until we found out that the last person was safe, I didn't relax for a second. No one in that operation centre could breathe easily until we knew they had made it."

Nadera Al-Sukkar of Mayday Rescue felt the pressure keenly. "We lost touch with Farouq and Jihad at some points, so the stress escalated. We also lost contact with the [White Helmets]. Morale was collapsing. All of us were worried that it's not going to happen, that it's too complicated, too difficult."

At the Canadian Embassy in Tel Aviv, Anthony Hinton and his colleagues were receiving updates from the IDF. Some of the Syrians, such as children born after the civil war began, lacked documentation. Others had lost passports in the fracas of war. But each case was worked out, and no one was turned away.

However, out of the estimated 800 White Helmets and family members who were expected to escape, only slightly more than half made it to the Golan Heights — many couldn't get past the different checkpoints across Syria and went into hiding. "We were hoping to save many more, but it was a war zone situation," says Hinton, "a dynamic unfolding situation literally as the Syrian regime was working to retake the territory."

It was 5 a.m. when the last buses crossed into Jordan.

August 28, Amman, Jordan: Reflecting on the operation, Wettlaufer says, "It had about a two percent chance of success. It was mission impossible. They were pinned between an advancing regime and ISIS forces, against two sealed international borders in one of the most politically sensitive regions of the world. There was no way this should have worked. And yet it did. And it did because of a committed minister — Chrystia Freeland — prepared to make a tough

decision and do the right thing. It did because of a range of officials in the field and in Ottawa who were seized by the matter and wanted to do the right thing. And it worked because of incredible, co-ordinated international diplomacy."

When Al-Sukkar caught up with the White Helmets at the undisclosed location in Jordan where they were being processed for resettlement, she began to fully realize the enormity of what they had accomplished. Their first words to her were, "Thank you for the miracle." They expressed sadness and concern about the teams that were left behind, but they also said that as soon as they entered the bus in the Golan Heights and saw themselves moving away from the border, they realized for the first time since January 2018, when Assad began cracking down on the White Helmets, that they are safe.

One man told her that when he woke up after falling asleep in a chair in the camp where they were staying, someone had put a blanket over him. Another said, "The nightmares have stopped." The rescuers had been rescued.

Journalist Sally Armstrong and photojournalist Peter Bregg travelled to Jordan and Israel in August 2018.

This story is a co-operative venture between The Observer and Reader's Digest and will appear in Reader's Digest's January-February 2019 issue and on readersdigest.ca.

