

"MIRACULOUS ... A STANDOUT. FERAS FAYYAD'S POWERFUL PORTRAIT AUDACIOUSLY PUTS WOMEN'S IMPERATIVE CONTRIBUTION TO SURVIVAL FRONT AND CENTER."

VARIETY

"I'VE RARELY SEEN A MORE INSPIRING FIGURE IN A MOVIE."

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE
MONITOR

"... BEAUTIFULLY HUMANISTIC ...
WITH REAL HOPE AND LEVITY"

Entertainment

"UNPRECEDENTED"

IndieWire

"EMOTIONALLY MOVING
... INTENSELY REAL"

Hollywood
REPORTER

"ONE OF THE MOST NECESSARY
FILMS OF THE YEAR"

DAILY BEAST

"EXTRAORDINARY"

Los Angeles Times

"A PORTRAIT OF
TRUE HEROISM"

POV

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF THE OSCAR®-NOMINATED
LAST MEN IN ALEPPO

Grotsky People's Choice
Documentary Award

tiff
Toronto International
Film Festival 2019



THE CAVE

HOPE SHINES IN THE DARKEST PLACES

هناك بريق للأمل في أكثر الأماكن رعباً

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTARY FILMS PRESENTS A DANISH DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION

IN ASSOCIATION WITH SWR TV 2 DENMARK DOHA SUN YAT-SEN CULTURAL FOUNDATION IMS DOCS UP FUND NORMANDIE FOR PEACE IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH MAJADE HECAT STUDIO "THE CAVE"
MUSIC BY MATTHEW HERBERT PRODUCED BY HEINO DECKERT AND CHADI ABO EDITED BY PER K. KIRKEGAARD DENNIS GÖL BERTENSEN CINEMATOGRAPHERS MUHAMMED ALASALI AMMAR SULAIMAN MOHAMMED EYAD
SOUND DESIGNER PETER ALBRECHTSEN LARS GINZEL EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS CAROLYN BERNSTEIN RYAN HARRINGTON MATT PENNER EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS EVA MULVAD PERNILLE ROSE GRØNKJÆR MIKALA KROGH
PRODUCED BY KIRSTINE BARFOED SIGRID DYKJÆR WRITTEN BY ALISAR HASAN AND FERAS FAYYAD DIRECTED BY FERAS FAYYAD

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THE CAVE.FILM

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A LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Artist of the Beautiful," the watchmaker Owen creates a beautiful mechanical butterfly as a gift for his childhood friend, Annie, now a wife and mother. She is astonished as the creature flutters forth from a carved box, exclaiming, "Beautiful! Beautiful! Is it alive? Is it alive?" When the creature alights on her finger, she turns to Owen and says, "Is it alive? Tell me if it be alive, or whether you created it." Owen replies, "Wherefore ask who created it, so it be beautiful?" Later on, an imprudent boy cruelly destroys the insect.

While I was working on "Last Men in Aleppo," we kept the focus on the military targeting of hospitals over a few years. Hospitals were demolished. Medics as well as patients were killed. The systematic targeting of hospitals was used as revenge, intimidation and a method to create chaos and force citizens to flee. No international countermeasures were introduced to stop these barbaric and vengeful attacks.

It became impossible for the health sector to exist on the surface, so hospitals were built underground. I was able to visit a number of them, and it was astonishing to witness the human ingenuity at work. These hospitals became the only hope for people to survive and receive treatment. And they provided a place where men and women could work together. In fact, these limited underground spaces might be the only places where women can work.

In the Cave, the hospital covered in this story, we witness how these female doctors and nurses are fighting to reclaim their rights in these subterranean hospitals. They stand up for themselves, which is something they couldn't do aboveground in the patriarchal culture surrounding them. These women are truly an inspiration to me, and I believe with this film they will inspire the world as well — contributing to breaking the outside world's silence. If the silence toward the brutality isn't broken and if no measures are taken against war crimes, then there is a problem in the human's universal claim to possess the rights of freedom, law and justice.

The current time in history is frightening because people are keener to glorify power. Like Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful," I wanted this film to be poetic — a film that helps us to look into the darkest corners of our souls and to inspire us to search for the light.

— Feras Fayyad, Director and Co-Writer

THE FILM

THE CAVE

“I will never forget the truth I lived through.”

— Dr. Amani Ballour



Al Ghouta, Syria. Dr. Amani in the underground tunnels. (Photo credit: National Geographic)

SYNOPSIS

Oscar nominee Feras Fayyad (“Last Men in Aleppo”) delivers an unflinching look at the Syrian war with his powerful new documentary, **THE CAVE**. For besieged civilians, hope and safety lie underground inside the subterranean hospital known as the Cave, where pediatrician and managing physician Dr. Amani Ballour and her colleagues Samaher and Dr. Alaa have claimed their right to work as equals alongside their male counterparts, doing their jobs in a way that would be unthinkable in the oppressively patriarchal culture that exists above. Following the women as they contend with daily bombardments, chronic supply shortages and the ever-present threat of chemical attacks, **THE CAVE** paints a stirring portrait of courage, resilience and female solidarity.

THE MAKING OF *THE CAVE*

In August 2013, the Assad government staged a chemical attack on the opposition stronghold of Al Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus. One of Feras Fayyad's friends, also a filmmaker, was able to capture the scene in the following days as rescue workers fanned out into the streets filled with the dead and barely living. Fayyad was galvanized by the footage of two female doctors working quickly and decisively. One of them was a young pediatrician, Dr. Amani Ballour.

Fayyad learned that Dr. Amani worked at the Cave, an underground hospital in Eastern Al Ghouta. The subterranean floors of the Cave were part of a six-story hospital construction site that had been left unfinished and had stood empty since the start of the Syrian rebellion. When the Assad government began stepping up its attacks on Al Ghouta in 2012, surgeon Dr. Salim Namour had the idea to open the underground portion of the building as a safe place to treat patients. Dr. Amani began working at the Cave soon after it opened and was instrumental in building out the hospital's underground levels. After the government laid siege to Al Ghouta in 2013, the Cave became one of the region's last bastions of lifesaving hope.

During the next two years, Fayyad kept up with news about Dr. Amani and the Cave while working on other projects, including "Last Men in Aleppo." By early 2016, he had begun exploring the possibility of making a film about underground spaces in Syria and was hoping to include the Cave. When Dr. Amani agreed to participate in the film, she had one stipulation, according to Fayyad: "She said, 'I have a responsibility to keep saving lives, so please be careful when you film with me. Be careful not to distract me from my work.'"

Unable to go to Al Ghouta himself because of the ongoing siege, Fayyad put together a cinematography team to film inside the Cave. His search led him to three gifted collaborators: Damascus-born cinematographers Muhammed Khair Al Shami, Ammar Sulaiman and Mohammad Eyad. Fayyad helped his team by sending examples of the kind of footage he was looking for.

The three cinematographers coordinated the workload so there was always someone at the Cave to record the staff going about their days. They also had a strategy in place to ensure that the three of them would be at the Cave when attacks occurred. "We had to reach the hospital before the attacks began," Al Shami explained. "So we would go directly on our motorcycles when we heard the alarm sirens ringing in the sky of the city and the civilians began running in the streets and shops closed because of fear of shelling. We started filming from the moment we arrived, before anything happened, and then we would film the main characters tending to the wounded who were brought in."

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

THE CAVE

The subterranean hospital is gone, but **THE CAVE** film exists as a record of the extraordinary haven that a brave group of doctors – women and men – built beneath the earth's surface. "In mythology and literature, the underground is where people suffer and kill," Fayyad reflected. "But Dr. Amani and her fellow doctors turned the underground into a place of surviving, where these incredible women did something every day to change their society."

DR. AMANI

Dr. Amani was forcibly displaced to northern Syria in 2018 and currently lives in Turkey. She has been threatened by the regime for her belief in empowering women and for her humanitarian work. Her current status as a refugee in Turkey means she cannot work as a doctor with her current medical degree. Despite this situation, she continues her humanitarian work by advising families who come to her home. Along with a group of other doctors, she also volunteers as a consultant for sick children in northern Syria using WhatsApp. She is seeking to be resettled in a third country so she can go back to college and complete her medical specialization as a pediatrician.

CONFLICT IN SYRIA

"Everyone just wants to survive."

– Dr. Amani Ballour

Since 2011, the war in Syria has spread death, destruction and horror across the country, [displacing 5.6 million civilians](#) and leaving more than [400,000 people dead](#).

TIMELINE OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

2010 SYRIA BEFORE THE WAR

- Syria's rich cultural history dates back more than 8,000 years.
- It is an economically fast-growing, lower-middle-income country, according to the World Bank. Agriculture, industry, tourism and oil are economic mainstays. Health care and primary and secondary education are free.
- President Bashar al Assad succeeds his father as ruler.

CONFLICT IN SYRIA *cont.*

- 2011**
- A group of teens and children are arrested for writing political graffiti in Daraa, Syria. The Syrian regime reacts violently to the peaceful pro-democracy protests that occur across the country. Dozens of people are killed when security forces crack down on demonstrators.
 - The U.S. and the European Union impose sanctions on oil, among other goods, in an attempt to pressure the Syrian government into ending its violent attacks, but these actions are futile.
 - Assad sends violent troops into the cities of Hama and Deir Ezzor, killing hundreds of civilians.
 - The Arab League, a voluntary association of countries whose peoples are mainly Arabic speaking or where Arabic is an official language, suspends Syria's membership, effective Nov. 16, 2011. Later, foreign ministers from 19 Arab League countries vote to impose economic sanctions against the Syrian regime for its part in the attacks on civilian demonstrators.
- 2012**
- The Syrian government increases its bombardment of citizens in a number of cities across the country.
 - The U.N. Security Council meets regarding Syria, but the meeting ends with no agreement on a draft resolution intended to pressure Syria to end its crackdown on anti-government demonstrators.
 - The United States closes its embassy in Damascus and recalls its diplomats. The Gulf Cooperation Council announces its member states are pulling their ambassadors from Damascus and expelling the Syrian ambassadors in their countries.
 - [Zaatari refugee camp](#) opens in Jordan near the Syrian border. Though designed as a temporary settlement, it becomes home to tens of thousands of Syrian refugees, who have now stayed for years.
 - The U.N. Human Rights Council states that [Syria has committed war crimes](#) and other acts that violate accepted international agreements.
- 2013**
- Assad announces he will not step down and that his vision of Syria's future includes a new constitution. Members of the opposition believe that Assad offers only empty rhetoric and no meaningful action to end the violence and oppression.
 - The Syrian government uses sarin, a chemical weapon, in an attack on Al Ghouta, killing more than 1,400 people.

CONFLICT IN SYRIA *cont.*

- 2013**
- U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay says that a U.N. fact-finding team has found “massive evidence” that the highest levels of the Syrian government are responsible for war crimes.
- 2014**
- [ISIS declares a caliphate](#) (an Islamic state) in Syria and Iraq’s occupied territory.
 - The U.N. Security Council unanimously [passes a resolution](#) boosting access to humanitarian aid in Syria.
 - The U.S. and allies launch [airstrikes against ISIS targets](#) in Syria, focusing on the cities of Raqqa and Aleppo.
 - [Russian President Vladimir Putin](#) announces that Russia is supporting the Syrian government in its fight against ISIS.
- 2015**
- Russia carries out its first airstrikes in Syria, saying it is targeting only ISIS, but the Syrian opposition says Russia is overwhelmingly targeting anti-Assad rebels and is doing more harm than good.
 - The World Food Program cuts rations to refugees in Lebanon and Jordan due to a funding shortfall.
 - Years into the conflict, the photo of [2-year-old Alan Kurdi](#) (initially reported as Aylan Kurdi) shocks the world and draws new attention to the devastation of the conflict in Syria.
 - Physicians for Human Rights stage a die-in in New York City to draw awareness to the medical professionals being targeted and killed by the Syrian regime.
- 2016**
- Supported by Russian planes, the Syrian government retakes Aleppo, a major rebel stronghold.
 - Turkey and Russia broker a cease-fire for eastern Aleppo so that civilians can be evacuated. The U.N. Security Council holds an emergency session amid reports of mounting civilian deaths and extrajudicial killings. The [cease-fire collapses](#) less than a day after it is implemented.
 - Tens of thousands of Syrian refugees are stranded in a remote refugee camp near the Jordanian border after Jordan closed the border to stem the flow of refugees entering the country; as of 2019, about [40,000 people remain there](#).

CONFLICT IN SYRIA *cont.*

2017

- After months of heavy coalition bombing and ground assaults by the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, ISIS is driven from Raqqa, its de facto capital in Syria.
- Dozens of civilians are reportedly killed in a suspected chemical attack in the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun. The Russian Defense Ministry claims that gas was released when Syrian forces bombed a chemical munitions depot operated by terrorists. [Activists, however, say that Syrians carried out another targeted chemical attack.](#)
- A cease-fire is brokered at the G-20 meeting for southwest Syria. Clashes are ongoing in a number of cities across the country.
- Reports continue about the Syrian government's deliberate and illegal withholding of critical aid to Syrians, including access to food and medical care.

2018

- Claims of a new chemical attack in Eastern Ghouta's main town of Douma prompt the U.S., Britain and France to carry out a wave of punitive strikes on Syrian targets.
- A U.N. envoy says the U.N. has verified at least [7,000 cases of children](#) either killed or maimed in Syria's seven-year war but that unverified reports put the number "way beyond 20,000."
- The Syrian army recaptures almost all of the south of the country, up to the borders with Jordan and Israeli-held territory.
- Trump announces the sudden withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Syria.
- Humanitarian access is limited because of ongoing insecurity, and 2.9 million people remain in hard-to-reach areas where aid is not supplied on a regular basis.

2019

- Syria enters the ninth year of the Syrian civil war.
- Winter storms batter Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, and rising floods drive many refugees from tent settlements, especially in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley.
- [Conflict increases](#) in northwest Syria, resulting in the destruction of health care facilities and the continuing displacement of Syrian people.

SOURCES

[World Vision](#) / [CNN](#) / [Mother Jones](#) / [BBC](#)

FAST FACTS

“From the moment I grew up, I knew I would face a conservative society and a racist and autocratic regime. I looked for a path to freedom. That is why I became a pediatrician. I can respond to the terrible reality and channel my anger the right way.”

– Dr. Amani Ballour

- There are 71 million displaced people around the world. [Source](#)
- 5.6 million Syrians have registered as refugees. [Source](#)
- 55% of Syrians have been displaced since 2011. [Source](#)
- At least 400,000 people have died due to the conflict, and this number continues to rise each day. [Source](#)
- 90% of Syrian refugees live outside of refugee camps, often in overcrowded and dangerous makeshift shelters or urban areas. [Source](#)
- 50% of all registered Syrian refugees are under the age of 18. [Source](#)
- An attack occurs on a Syrian hospital every 29 hours. [Source](#)
- 58% of public hospitals and 49% of primary health centers are either only partially functional or have closed. [Source](#)
- At least 912 medical professionals have been killed in Syria since 2011. [Source](#)
- There are more than 20 underground or cave hospitals in Syria. [Source](#)
- In Aleppo, one of the most populous cities in Syria, fewer than 30 doctors service the needs of the entire community. [Source](#)
- Thousands of lives were saved in the cave hospital featured in this film.
- According to the Syrian Female Journalists Network, women make up 54% of the Syrian radio workforce in emerging media outlets set up after the war broke out in 2011. [Source](#)
- In Lebanon, 2,100 Syrian refugee women, Lebanese women and youth from conflict-affected communities have learned vocational skills to increase their incomes. [Source](#)
- In 2000, the U.N. Security Council approved resolution 1325, which marked the start of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The resolution urged the participation of women in peace initiatives, protection from violations of their human rights and the prevention of conflicts. [Source](#)
- Between 1990 and 2000, just 11% of peace agreements signed included a reference to women. Since the turn of the century, this has risen to 27%, far from a significant increase. [Source](#)

CONVERSATION STARTERS



Al Ghouta, Syria. Dr. Amani among rubble. (Photo credit: National Geographic)

Before or after a screening of **THE CAVE**, the following questions exploring key themes from the film can be used to stimulate in-depth discussion among a group. They are designed to help facilitators encourage and contextualize the conversation. To learn more about the issues, and prepare as a facilitator, check out the resources for further study on page 14 and the UNHCR materials for educators who want to [teach about refugees](#).

- 1 The Cave is an underground hospital, one of several across Syria. What do you think are the benefits and drawbacks to establishing a lifesaving institution so precariously underground?
- 2 What is your understanding of what a refugee is?
- 3 The Cave is a hospital led by a young woman, Dr. Amani. What do you think are some of the challenges she may face in this role?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After the screening of **THE CAVE**, you can use the following discussion questions to stimulate a thoughtful dialogue about the film.

- 1 Why do you think Dr. Amani and the other medical professionals are willing to devote so much of their time and energy to running the Cave, at great personal risk to them?
- 2 How does Dr. Amani's story serve as an inspiration for women and girls in conflict zones around the world?
- 3 Why do you think Dr. Amani and her team sought out women in their community to offer them jobs?
- 4 If you could ask someone in the film one question, who would you want to speak to and what would you ask?
- 5 The director of this film, Feras Fayyad, is Syrian and worked with a Syrian film team to make it. How do you think this impacts the narrative and tone of the film?
- 6 Is there an area of your life in which you are compelled to put the needs of others before your own?
- 7 What was your understanding of the Syrian conflict before watching this film? How has that changed?
- 8 Why do you think the Syrian government violently targets hospitals or medical professionals?
- 9 How was sound used in the film? How were you impacted by the soundtrack, both of music and of the bombings?
- 10 In the film, Dr. Salim discusses how music can be an anesthetic. Why do you think Dr. Salim liked to listen to music while operating? Do you have any forms of art that help you focus?
- 11 The director of this film, Feras Fayyad, has spoken about how his strong mother and sisters have influenced him throughout his life. How does that inspiration permeate the film?
- 12 What are some of the impacts of the war that we see Samaher, the hospital cook, exhibiting?
- 13 The underwater imagery at the end of the film alludes to the experience of over 2 million refugees who have risked their lives by crossing the Mediterranean Sea since 2014. At least 20,000 of them died on their way to seek refuge. Why do you think people are willing to embark on such a dangerous journey?

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP



Al Ghouta, Syria. Dr. Amani (R) helps a young girl into the hospital. (Photo credit: National Geographic)

ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY AND CLASSROOM SCREENINGS

Tell your peers, family and friends about **THE CAVE** and the opportunity for them to host screenings in their place of work or a community center. They can visit [THE CAVE website](#) to learn next steps.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE REFUGEES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

[Refugee Council USA](#) provides state-by-state information about refugee communities and ways to take action.

SUPPORT REFUGEES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Take this [online course](#) offered by USAHello to help you become culturally competent when you are working, interacting or volunteering with refugees and immigrants. Then, reach out to local organizations in your town to participate in their efforts to welcome refugees to your community.

HEAR FROM DR. AMANI IN HER OWN WORDS

Read Dr. Amani's personal account of the human rights abuses in Syria in an [opinion piece](#) recently published by the Daily Beast.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

BOOKS

- [My Country: A Syrian Memoir](#) Kassem Eid, Bloomsbury Publishing. 2018.
- [The Crossing](#) Samar Yazbek, Ebury Digital. 2015.
- [The New Odyssey](#) Patrick Kingsley, Liveright. 2017.
- [No Turning Back](#) Rania Abouzeid, OneWorld. 2018.

MEDIA

- [INTERACTIVE] [Brothers Across Borders](#)
- [ARTICLE] [Health Care Workers in the Setting of the “Arab Spring”: A Scoping Review for the Lancet-AUB Commission on Syria](#) Lama Bou-Karroum, Karim N. Daou, Mohamed Nomier, Nour El Arnaout, Fouad M. Fouad, Fadi El-Jardali and Elie A. Akl, J Glob Health. 2019.
- [ARTICLE] [Hospitals Become the Front Line in the Syrian Civil War](#) Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, The FP Group. 2017.
- [INTERACTIVE] [Illegal Attacks on Health Care in Syria](#) Physicians for Human Rights. 2019.
- [ARTICLE] [Medical Personnel Are Targeted in Syria](#) Physicians for Human Rights. 2019.
- [PODCAST] [Refugee Stories: In Their Own Voices](#) Tiffany Jelke, Southern Methodist Univ & Human Rights Media. 2018.
- [PODCAST] [Refugees’ Stories Podcast](#) Jessica Stone, Refugees’ Stories Podcast. 2018.
- [VIDEO] [Syrian Refugees Fled Assad’s Rule, Now They’re Returning](#) Vice News, HBO. 2019.
- [ARTICLE] [The Shadow Doctors](#) Ben Taub, The New Yorker. 2016.
- [ARTICLE] [Why Is There a War in Syria?](#) BBC News. 2019.
- [ARTICLE] [“Women’s Hisbah” in al-Hol](#) Rami Abdurrahman, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. 2019.
- [PODCAST] [Working a Refugee Crisis: Jordan](#) Colin Campbell, PodBean. 2017.

ADVOCACY GROUPS

- [The Center for Victims of Torture](#)
- [Council on Foreign Relations](#)
- [Doctors Without Borders](#)
- [International Rescue Committee](#)
- [Physicians for Human Rights](#)
- [Syrian American Medical Society](#)
- [The U.N. Refugee Agency](#)
- Instructional resource: [Teaching About Refugees](#)
- [The White Helmets](#)

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

FERAS FAYYAD (Director, Co-Writer)

Feras Fayyad is an award-winning filmmaker who has received particular recognition for his work on contemporary Syrian issues and the political transformation of the Arab world. His most recent film, “Last Men in Aleppo,” earned him a 2018 Academy Award nomination and an Emmy for Best Documentary Feature. Fayyad was born in Syria in 1984. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in audiovisual arts and filmmaking from The International Film and Television School EICAR in Paris. He has directed and edited several films, both documentaries and fiction. His other films include the feature documentary “My Escape” and television documentaries “Between the Fighter in Syria” and “Wide Shot-Close Shot.” He also produced, co-wrote and edited the award-winning short film “One Day in Aleppo,” directed by Ali Alibrahim.

KIRSTINE BARFOD (Producer)

Kirstine Barfod has an extensive background in filmmaking and has produced and co-produced several feature documentaries and series and short fiction films. She is currently working with the Oscar-nominated director Feras Fayyad (“Last Men in Aleppo,” **THE CAVE**) on his third feature documentary, “The Mystery of Epilogue.” Other forthcoming films are the feature documentary “Family Apart,” by Mira Jargil, and the documentary series “Absolute Beginners,” by Thora Lorentzen. Previous credits include the acclaimed feature documentary “Venus,” by Mette Carla Albrechtsen and Lea Glob (Audience Award, 2017 IndieLisboa International Independent Film Festival); the feature documentary “Born to Lose,” by Palle Demant; and the comedic short “Euroman,” by Gavriil Tzafkas.

SIGRID DYEKJÆR (Producer)

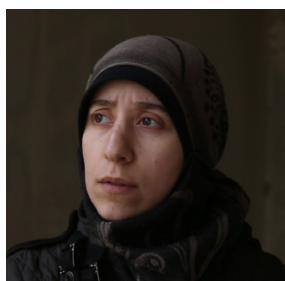
A leading figure in Denmark’s film industry, Sigrid Dyekjær has produced over 30 documentary features in the past 17 years. She is a co-founder of the respected production company Danish Documentary Productions, which she established in 2007 with directors Eva Mulvad, Pernille Rose Grønkjær and Mikala Krogh.

Her most recent credits include Viktor Kossakovsky’s acclaimed “Auarela”; Jørgen Leth’s “I Walk”; Mulvad’s “A Cherry Tale,” “Love Child” and “A Modern Man”; Grønkjær’s “Hunting for Hedonia” and “Comedian Mind”; Jacob Thuesen and Tómas Gislason’s “The Missing Films”; Alina Rudnitskaya’s “School of Seduction”; and Max Kestner’s “Woman Two Steps in Front of Me.” Other notable credits are Andreas Johnsen’s “Bugs” and “Ai Weiwei: The Fake Case” (2014 winner of the Danish Film Critics Association Bodil Award for Best Documentary); Phie Ambo’s “Free the Mind” and “Mechanical Love”; and Kestner’s “Amateurs in Space.” She was executive producer on “Ballroom Dancer” (winner of Nordic Panorama 2012 and Special Mention at Tribeca Film Festival). In 2015, Dyekjær was recognized with The Ib Award, given by Danish directors to honor the best producer in the Danish film industry. Her work has earned her a 2016 Producers Guild of America nomination for Outstanding Producer of Documentary. She is now a member of the PGA.

ABOUT THE FILM SUBJECTS

“I want this film to be a step on the way toward justice; maybe we’ll achieve justice one day. I want to tell the younger generation of Syrians, the children of Syrians, the truth of what happened here. And I especially want the women in my country to know that they are strong. They can challenge the restrictions; they can do what they want to do. I tried to say to all the women that I saw, all the time, ‘Don’t care about the society, about what people will say about you. You have to do what you love. Just believe in yourself.’ One day, things will change. Society will change.”

— Dr. Amani Ballour



*Al Ghouta, Syria. Dr. Amani.
(Photo credit: National
Geographic)*

DR. AMANI BALLOUR

A natural leader and problem solver, Dr. Amani Ballour was only 29 when her colleagues elected her to oversee the Cave in 2016. As director, Dr. Amani contended with the grave realities specific to running a hospital under siege conditions: finding solutions to equipment and medicine shortages; protecting the structure itself by adding aboveground and underground fortifications; and, above all, ensuring the safety of patients and staff. Meanwhile, she continued to work as a pediatrician, tending to the constant stream of sick and injured children who needed treatment. She also assisted in surgery.

Dr. Amani is a compassionate and reassuring figure to the infants and children she treats, and to their parents. She fights back against the patriarchal conservatism that designates women as weak and inferior to men, and is staunchly committed to standing up for women’s rights to live and work as they choose. She lives her beliefs, too, whether she’s encouraging little girls to see themselves as important and capable, or offering jobs to civilian women who need a means of income. Dr. Amani was born and raised in Eastern Al Ghouta and completed her general medical studies at the University of Damascus in 2012. She began studying for her specialty in pediatrics but abandoned her studies to help the people of Al Ghouta, who were coming under attack from the Assad regime. She started treating children — particularly those who were injured under bombardment in remote areas of the province — in emergency rooms. She began working at the Cave in 2013.

The 2013 chemical attack on Al Ghouta altered Dr. Amani’s life and perspective as she worked in rescue and relief operations. She kept detailed journals about the attack and the days that followed, and wrote and blogged about the attack’s impact on people and the environment.

ABOUT THE FILM SUBJECTS *cont.*

“Samaher is so fun and charismatic. She gives so much to everyone, but also she has opinions. She’s suffering from trauma and you can feel how sensitive and alert she is to any sound, to any movement that happens around her. We’d ask ourselves, ‘How does this woman continue to do this work?’ But this is her power, her strength, her courage. She fights her trauma to continue to do what she does until the last minute, without giving up. She can teach us so much about how you can deal with inhuman and dangerous conditions around you – that you should keep smiling, you should enjoy your life, you should cook.”

— Feras Fayyad



*Al Ghouta, Syria.
Nurse Samaher (center)
in the operation room.
(Photo credit: National
Geographic)*

SAMAHER

Lively, funny and warm, nurse Samaher is the Cave’s mother hen. She’s also a hard worker who knows how to stand up for herself. She sustained a head injury in one of the attacks on the Cave; as a result, she suffers from partial amnesia. She generally makes light of her condition with her colleagues but remains deeply fearful of another attack.

Samaher studied and received several trainings in professional nursing before the start of the Syrian conflict. At the beginning of the uprising in 2011, she and her sister assisted in rescuing injured protestors. When the regime started targeting medical professionals, her pro-Assad brother-in-law reported his wife, Samaher’s sister, to the authorities. Samaher and her husband left for Jordan in 2012 to avoid arrest. But with rising numbers of severely injured Syrians arriving in Jordan, Samaher felt a responsibility to contribute to relief efforts. She returned to Syria in 2013 and began working at the Cave.

ABOUT THE FILM SUBJECTS *cont.*

“Salim is an amazing man, very liberal and open-minded. Music is his way of creating happiness and it’s also his way of resistance. And we tried to use that to tell his story.”

— Feras Fayyad



*Al Ghouta, Syria. Dr. Salim.
(Photo credit: National Geographic)*

DR. SALIM NAMOUR

Dr. Salim Namour is the oldest doctor working within the Cave, as well as the most experienced. In the early days of the 2011 uprising, he adopted a pseudonym, Sakhr, which means “rock.” And he is very much the rock his colleagues can always count on: calm, supportive, loyal. He is a good friend and adviser to Dr. Amani, and he makes it clear to everyone that he respects and believes in her. He also works closely with Samaher as he performs the most difficult surgeries in the Cave, always with classical music playing on his mobile phone. Dr. Salim is a general surgeon and previously volunteered in the medical rescue and relief of civilian victims of the Iraq war, as well as the Lebanese-Israeli war in 2006. When the uprising in Syria began in 2011, he treated injured protestors and adopted the pseudonym Sakhr to avoid being identified by the Assad regime and its supporters. He was one of the most active doctors in Al Ghouta after the 2013 chemical weapons attack. He provided testimony to the United Nations and human rights organizations that investigated the attacks. The siege of Eastern Al Ghouta separated him from his wife and four children, who were living in regime-controlled Damascus.



*Al Ghouta, Syria. Dr. Amani
(left) and Dr. Alaa (right)
in the operating room.
(Photo credit: National
Geographic)*

DR. ALAA

Quiet and shy, Dr. Alaa is dedicated to her work. She completed her medical studies at the University of Damascus and was studying for her specialty in pediatrics when the uprising began in 2011. She was forced to abandon her studies when the regime took over university medical centers. She volunteered at field hospitals and treated injured protestors. Dr. Alaa was working in Al Ghouta when it came under siege and went to work with Dr. Amani and Samaher after the Cave was established. She continued her studies in pediatrics on her own to complete her specialization. She is currently living and working in the northern region of Syria, which is under Turkish protection.

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