VISUALIZING THE SYRIAN CRISIS: FIRST-PERSON DOCUMENTARIES AS TOOLS OF VISUAL GLOBAL POLITICS

ВІЗУАЛІЗАЦІЯ СИРІЙСЬКОЇ КРИЗИ: ДОКУМЕНТАЛЬНІ ФІЛЬМИ ВІД ПЕРШОЇ ОСОБИ ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТИ ВІЗУАЛЬНОЇ ГЛОБАЛЬНОЇ ПОЛІТИКИ

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Abstract. This article aims to explore the influence of images in international politics. Images from films, television, and photographs shape how we perceive and respond to events such as wars, disasters and protests. These images have become a political force, significantly impacting international politics. Powerful war visuals serve as stark reminders of their horrors and brutalities. To understand this, the study has taken two documentaries made on Syria's civil war and refugee crisis. This study examines how documentaries, particularly "Escape from Syria: Rania's Odyssey" (2017) and "For Sama" (2019), produced by Syrian women filmmakers, shape global perceptions of the conflict and its associated refugee crisis. Using a feminist perspective, these personal narratives offer intimate, gendered insights that contrast with the Western media's often stereotypical portrayals. Drawing on visual politics theories, the article underlines how images act as political instruments, shaping public opinion and mobilising humanitarian action. The research employed the case study and content analysis methods to understand the impact of the documentaries. The study demonstrates that, by democratising storytelling, these documentaries amplify the voices of marginalised individuals, providing verifiable accounts that deepen our understanding of international politics and refugee policies. They prompt global audiences to question their assumptions, advocating for justice and reform in regions affected by crisis, thereby reshaping narratives around the human toll of the Syrian conflict.

Keywords: Syrian Civil War, Syrian Refugees, Images, Documentary, Visual Global Politics

Анотація. Ця стаття має на меті дослідити вплив зображень у міжнародній політиці. Зображення з фільмів, телебачення та фотографій формують те, як ми сприймаємо та реагуємо на такі події, як війни, катастрофи та протести. Ці зображення стали політичною силою, що суттєво впливає на міжнародну політику. Потужні візуальні ефекти війни слугують яскравим нагадуванням про їхні жахи та жорстокість. Щоб зрозуміти це, дослідження взяло два документальні фільми, зняті про громадянську війну та кризу біженців у Сирії. Це дослідження розглядає, як документальні фільми, зокрема «Втеча з Сирії: Одіссея Ранії» (2017) та «Для Сами» (2019), створені сирійськими жінками-кінематографістками, формують глобальне сприйняття конфлікту та пов'язаної з ним кризи біженців. Використовуючи феміністичну перспективу, ці особисті наративи пропонують інтимні, гендерно змішані погляди, що контрастують із часто стереотипними зображеннями західних ЗМІ. Спираючись на теорії візуальної політики, стаття підкреслює, як зображення діють як політичні інструменти, формуючи громадську думку та мобілізуючи гуманітарні дії.

У дослідженні використовувалися методи тематичного дослідження та контент-аналізу, щоб зрозуміти вплив документальних фільмів. Дослідження демонструє, що, демократизуючи розповідь історій, ці документальні фільми посилюють голоси маргіналізованих осіб, надаючи перевірені розповіді, які поглиблюють наше розуміння міжнародної політики та політики щодо біженців. Вони спонукають світову аудиторію сумніватися у своїх припущеннях, виступаючи за справедливість та реформи в регіонах, постраждалих від кризи, тим самим змінюючи наративи щодо людських жертв сирійського конфлікту.

***Ключові слова:** Громадянська війна в Сирії, Сирійські біженці, Зображення, Документальні фільми, Візуальна глобальна політика.*

Introduction. The Arab Spring, ignited in 2011 across at least six nations, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain, marked a seismic wave of unrest driven primarily by disillusioned youth. Frustrated by entrenched, ageing dictatorships, these young activists sought transformative political, economic, and social change. Their protests, fueled by aspirations for democracy and equity, erupted with fervour but often yielded turbulent outcomes. In Syria, the movement spiralled into a protracted civil war, spawning a devastating humanitarian crisis. Yemen descended into its civil conflict, while Egypt saw the reemergence of military authoritarianism. Syria remains the starkest tragedy, with a conflict of almost thirteen years driving millions to flee as refugees, seeking shelter in neighbouring countries like Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, as well as in Europe, the United States, and Canada. The dreams of reform were met with violence, displacement, and instability, leaving a complex legacy of hope and despair. In December 2024, the Assad regime fell, and later a caretaker government was formed in March 2025. Although war is still ongoing in many parts of the country.

From the outset, the media have been a cornerstone in shedding light on the human toll of the Arab Spring, particularly the plight of stateless Syrians and others displaced by the upheaval. The media played a critical role in exposing the loss of lives, particularly for stateless Syrians and other displaced groups. Social media platforms like X and outlets like *Al Jazeera* provided real-time, ground-level coverage, amplifying the voices of marginalised individuals—activists, survivors, and families. This visibility spurred global awareness, with dozens of documentaries and films emerging from both Western and Middle Eastern creators. This visibility sparked global awareness, driving dozens of documentaries showcased at festivals like Sundance and Berlinale, which blended Western and Middle Eastern perspectives to advocate for victims. These works, often showcased at prominent Western film festivals, have played a critical role in advocating for victims of the civil wars and refugee crises. Among these, two poignant documentaries by Syrian women filmmakers stand out. Through their lenses, these women, both victims and storytellers, offer intimate, gendered perspectives on the suffering and resilience of their people, bringing the human cost of the crisis to the global stage with unflinching clarity.

The purpose of this article is to explore how international events influence image creation and how that image shapes our understanding of those events. Photography, film, and television shape our perceptions and responses to a wide range of events, including wars, humanitarian crises, social protests, economic downturns, and political campaigns (Bleiker, 2018). A single photo, like a refugee's journey, can evoke empathy, spur activism, or shape policy, amplified by platforms like X. Images and photographs not just tell the stories of war but also try to transform that conflict into peace (Allbeson, Oldfield, and Mitchell 2025). Documentaries like *For Sama* humanise crises, countering mainstream media's simplifications. Television coverage of protests or economic crises amplifies urgency, shaping narratives. However, images risk manipulation or bias, as Bleiker (2018) notes. Their emotional power transcends borders, fostering solidarity or outrage, driving action or reflection. The paper will try to examine the images and understand how images are made political. Therefore, the paper has chosen two documentaries, *Escape from Syria: Rania's Odyssey* (2017) and *For Sama* (2019), produced by two female film directors, Rania Ali Mustafa and Waad Al-Kateab, as case studies to understand how they have attempted to bring the Syrian crisis to a global audience.

The paper offers five major arguments. First, the women filmmakers have been able to represent their experience as war victims and refugees from a feminist perspective. Second, the representation has been efficient, which is different from other documentaries in popular media. Third, despite being

a first-person narrative, it was easy to experience the war and refugee crisis, and it offered a different perspective on the Arab Spring and Syrian Civil War. Fourth, a documentary is a powerful tool to represent real-life situations and also helps shape global perceptions of political issues. Fifth, the filmmakers' agenda was to establish peace through the visuals.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. First, it explains the role of documentaries in representing the civil war and refugee crisis. Second, it analyses the content of the two documentaries. The last section examines how Western documentaries were different from these two documentaries in terms of the politics of representation. It will try to understand how the facts presented in the documentaries help us know the real world. The paper emphasises how images function as political instruments, affecting public opinion and inspiring humanitarian actions, drawing on theories of visual politics (Bleiker, 2018; Callahan, 2020). The paper employs case study and content analysis as its methodologies. The study has attempted to systematically analyse the content of the documentaries to gain an in-depth understanding.

Literature Review. In a globally connected and technologically advanced world, we receive information about various international events through visual media. Visuals convey complex information quickly and emotionally. Images and visual objects can serve meaningful political and social functions (Bleiker, Chapman, and Shim 2021). They actively influence political discourse, social movements, and cultural norms by shaping perceptions, evoking emotions, and mobilising action. To understand the dynamics of global politics today, visuals should be taken seriously (Bleiker, 2023). Images influence our perception of the world by highlighting certain aspects while concealing others (Callahan, 2020). W.J.T. Mitchell (1986) refers to a "visual" or "pictorial" turn, emphasising that people tend to perceive and recall significant events more through images than through written or spoken narratives. Iconic images hold immense power, often compelling ethical and political reactions. Images are political forces in themselves and usually shape politics, policies and action (Bleiker, 2018). A piece of art can inspire us to view the world differently, prompting us to reconsider long-held assumptions, including those related to politics. James Der Derian (2018) describes a "war of images," where visual media are a critical strategic element in warfare, employed by all actors at every level.

Images serve as weapons in diverse ways: they instil fear, recruit fighters, influence public opinion, guide drones and missiles, and ultimately wage a visual form of war. According to Ronald Bleiker (2018), visual politics has been democratised, as selective media outlets no longer control it. In today's digital age, anyone with a smartphone or camera can capture and share images instantly, amplifying their reach through social media platforms like X, Instagram, or TikTok. These images shape global perceptions of crises, ranging from civil wars to refugee movements, offering raw and unfiltered glimpses into human experiences. Unlike traditional media, which often curates narratives, citizen photography, such as Syrians documenting their war-torn streets post-Arab Spring, provides authentic, immediate visuals that resonate deeply. A single image, like that of a displaced child or a bombed-out city, can evoke empathy, spark outrage, or drive activism, influencing how audiences interpret and respond to global events. The link between visuality and how society and politics are perceived is shaped by underlying power relations. Similarly, the images used to represent conflict are influenced by existing structures of power. (Hutchison and Bleiker 2021). Humanitarian ethics are now widely recognised as a core value in promoting global peace. Visuals of conflict and human suffering support humanitarian ethics and help to establish a peaceful international order. Powerful images of human suffering have played a crucial role in shaping both the rise of humanitarianism and our understanding of conflict and the pursuit of peace.

Images transcend language barriers, conveying visceral truths about conflict, suffering, or resilience. For instance, photos of refugees crossing the Mediterranean have galvanised humanitarian efforts while exposing the scale of the crisis. Yet, this power cuts both ways: images can be manipulated or decontextualised, shaping biased narratives. Social media's viral nature amplifies impact but risks oversimplification. Still, these visuals humanise distant crises, fostering global solidarity and urging action. In our interconnected world, images are not just reflections of reality; they actively shape our understanding and response to it.

Research Methods. The study employs content analysis and case study as research methods for this article. Content analysis is a research technique that systematically explores visual and textual

content to identify recurring themes, patterns, and meanings (Lamont, 2021). Case studies involve an in-depth examination of one or a few subjects to gain insights that can be applied more broadly (Lamont, 2021). This research employs two case studies, the two documentaries, *"Escape from Syria: Rania's Odyssey"* (2017) and *"For Sama"* (2019), to examine the influence of images on global political dynamics.

Role of documentaries in representing the civil war and the refugee crisis

Documentaries have emerged as powerful tools for shedding light on the human dimensions of civil wars and refugee crises, offering nuanced perspectives that counter mainstream media's often reductive narratives. Since the Arab Spring ignited in 2011, sparking uprisings in Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, and beyond, documentaries have captured the raw realities of conflict, resilience, and displacement.

These documentaries serve as acts of social engagement, amplifying marginalised perspectives and fostering empathy. By focusing on personal narratives, they reveal the emotional and psychological toll of war, from families fleeing Aleppo to refugees navigating perilous journeys to Europe. Unlike fleeting news cycles, documentaries offer depth, context, and historical grounding, illuminating systemic issues such as political oppression or Western interventions that fueled the Arab Spring's aftermath. They also highlight resilience, showcasing communities rebuilding amid chaos.

Moreover, platforms like Netflix and festivals like Sundance have democratized access, enabling global audiences to engage with these stories. By centring lived experiences, documentaries not only document history but also inspire action, urging viewers to confront uncomfortable truths and advocate for change. In a world desensitised by headlines, they remain vital for humanising crises and rekindling global solidarity. According to John Grierson, a documentary is "creative treatment of actuality" (Nichols, 2017). Whatever documentary films are, they are very real and known facts, and they never introduce anything new or unverifiable. Documentaries feature real people who don't act or perform roles, unlike actors. Instead, they play or present themselves in front of the camera. Documentaries possess a unique storytelling power. Documentaries aim to engage the audience in real-life situations. They tell us about changes that take place over time, with a beginning, middle, and end, be they the experiences of an individual or an entire society. Many famous films, such as *Rome Open City* (1945), *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), and *The Turtle Can Fly* (2004), are not based on historical events. Instead of that, the famous French documentary by Alain Resnais on Jews holocaust, *Night and Fog* (1956), is much more engaging, and the footage creates fear among the audience. To the extent that a documentary tells a story, the story is a plausible representation of what happened, rather than an imaginative interpretation of what might have happened. It will be told from the perspective of the filmmaker in the form and style of their choice, but it will correspond to known facts and actual events.

Documentary filmmaking helps reveal the complex dynamics of international politics by showing how state relations intersect with personal experiences like hospitality, alienation, and vulnerability (Callahan 2015). First-person documentary filmmaking is a socially engaged and politically active form of filmmaking, through which the filmmaker assumes various social roles, such as mother, activist, wife, and refugee (Yu, 2018). A first-person documentary can describe any non-fiction event when the director leans into their subjective point of view and experience, whether it involves personal or global issues, rather than adopting a silent, omniscient viewpoint (Bill, 2017). In documentary subject participation, it begins with capturing the raw footage, which is then handed over to a production team (director/producer/editor).

Several films and documentaries have been produced on the Arab Spring, the Syrian Crisis, and the refugee crises in West Asia and Europe. The Western Media houses and other media houses from Russia, such as *Al Jazeera,* have made hundreds of documentaries on the same topic, keeping in line with their political agenda. But documentaries made by victims carry much more significance and authenticity.

Escape from Syria: Rania's odyssey (2017)

Rania Ali Mustafa, a 20-year-old Kurdish woman, fled from Racca, which was captured by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). She was trying to flee to Europe, and one man from Norway asked her to document her journey with the new camera she gave him. As the title suggests, she was going through a journey, or like an odyssey, where she encountered new difficulties in life. We can

see her walking through the destruction of the Racca, which was once home to them. The outside world may think this is a war zone, but for her, it was home. She wants to stay back, but to have a better future, she wants to cross the dangerous sea. During the same time, Europe was changing refugee laws, so she wanted to move as early as possible. She had a plan to first go to Turkey; from there, she could go to Europe. She took a small bag along with some essential things, such as her mother's photographs, Game of Thrones DVDs, some clothes, etc. She crossed the border and reached a town named Urfa in Turkey, with the help of a smuggler, and the fees were $300. She, along with other friends, fled Syria. It was a challenging task to cross the border illegally and not see the family. Moreover, crossing the sea was scary as there were no guarantees of life. In a boat of 15 people, the smugglers accommodated 52 people, and there were also kids while crossing the sea. As usual, the boat was drowned and later rescued by a ship and taken to an unknown island. The migrants had a destination of Germany and other states. The smugglers made them foolish as they were supposed to go to Macedonia with the ticket, but later came to know it was a scam.

They did not have enough money but had to manage their food and accommodation in a hotel. We can see that most of the time they stayed without having food, and the only concern is how to reach their destination. As they were not allowed to cross the border, they were staying in the refugee camps along the Greece-Macedonia border. The refugees were staying in tents in unhealthy conditions, and there was nobody to help them. Rania wondered why nobody was concerned about them and what the best solution was for this issue. We can see graffiti on the tents written as 'open the border' or 'save us'. They were trying to cross the border as early as possible, as some of the refugees were deported to Turkey. They were walking towards the border in dangerous situations. The road was not good as they passed through the villages and the interiors. There were people who were physically challenged and were not able to walk. Eventually, they entered Macedonia, where some of the refugees were beaten off, and from there, they entered Greece. People can be seen shouting to open the border and to save them. We can see mothers going along with small kids. In Greece, the border was closed, and tear gas was used on the refugees. Towards the end, in one of the scenes, the one border security guard from the opposite side said to Rania that it's extremely hot and they should not stay in this weather. It depicts that security guards were obliged to protect the border and, at the same time, showed humanity for the refugees. He has little option but to help the refugees by defending the border. Like the conflicting emotions and desires sparked by crossing borders, guarding or securing a border also generates comparable tensions (Choi, 2018). Later, she, along with her friend Arman, borrowed some money and went to Bulgaria as tourists by using fake IDs. But they were caught in Austria and were deported to Vienna. At present, Rania is in Vienna and works as a journalist. According to Rania, in most of the video footage available in public, men are shown as war victims, and women are mostly sidelined. But she wanted to show women can also look for a better life, and they can do what men can do.

For Sama (2019)
The documentary For Same is a powerful representation of the devastating lives of the civilians from the war zone of Aleppo. The filmmaker Waad Al-Kateab made this documentary for her daughter from the perspective of a mother. She used this medium as a tool to showcase the world exactly what happened in the Syrian Civil War. She has tried to give all the minute details from the ground. This first-person documentary by Waad, along with Edward Watts, asks for a better future for children like Sama, who is Waad's daughter.

Waad started to document the incidents in 2012 of the movement as a 22-year-old student with a cellphone at Aleppo University, studying to earn an economics degree. At that time, protests erupted against the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad. In April 2012, the students at the university used the university wall by making various graffiti and words like AZADI and Freedom and were looking for revolution. She, along with her friend and future husband Hamza, a fellow activist, was providing medical facilities to the other activists. Waad was surprised to see that the regime was willing to stay in power rather than quit, and the activists seeking democracy were termed as the 'terrorists'. The civilians who were killed in numbers were protesting, and we can see the dead bodies and the mass graves. Waad and Hamza lost many of their friends and fellow activists.

Waad and Hamza both didn't leave the city and later got married in the war zone, and eventually they had a baby girl. The moment Waad came to know about the pregnancy, she was scared about the future that she was going to introduce to the child. As a mother, she wanted a secure place where she, along with the baby, and as the wife of Hamza, could stay happily. She was scared of dying once a new life was budding within her. Throughout the documentary, the sound of guns and the explosion of bombs could be heard.

Not only can we see the impact of war on the women, but also on the children. The young boy, Wisam, could be seen crying because he did not want to leave the city, and he was scared. Also, we could see lots of young children died in the bomb blast. On the contrary, children could be seen playing, who have no idea of war and crisis. One of the scenes is very powerful where nine pregnant women who were hit by the bomb were brought to the hospital, and the children they gave birth to were born alive. Eventually, the only hospital which was run by Hamza and his colleagues was hit by the bomb. The couple did not leave the city despite various difficulties. Lastly, Hamza was asked to surrender by the Russians, or they could go into exile. So, they had to leave the city with lots of risks and dangers.

One thing is clear: no one wants to be a refugee and leave their homeland at any cost. Those who have left hoped to return and look forward to a new future, seeking freedom and democratic values that will build a new nation for future generations. Waad was seen walking with Sama through the ruins of Aleppo, reminiscent of Roberto Rossellini's 'Germany Year Zero', where a young boy was depicted standing amidst the ruins of Berlin. She wrote a heartfelt letter to her daughter. Later, Waad gave birth to another daughter, and currently, Waad and Hamza reside in the United Kingdom with their two daughters.

The goal of political science is to learn the facts about the real world (Bleiker 2001). Documentaries and films help us to think about international politics, which has been represented through those media (Dodds and Carter, 2014). The documentary *For Sama* discussed the Syrian civilians and the domestic politics that led to the crisis. Involvement of Russia in the Syrian crisis and active participation in the war unfolded the political and ideological rivalry between the West and Russia. It wanted support from the global community for the civilians fighting against Assad.

Rania's documentary critiques Europe's refugee policies, spotlighting the tension between state security and human compassion. It questions the perceived lack of empathy among Europeans, often framed as prioritising national interests over humanitarian obligations. The film likely delves into the perilous journeys refugees undertake—crossing treacherous seas, evading smugglers, and enduring violence—to reach Europe, highlighting their desperation for safety and a better life. These narratives underscore the moral dilemma: while borders, checkpoints, and visas are critical for maintaining state sovereignty and security, they can also become barriers that strip refugees of hope and dignity.

Borders serve as both literal and symbolic lines. They protect national identity and regulate immigration, ensuring economic and social stability. Checkpoints and visa systems filter entrants, aiming to prevent threats like terrorism or crime. However, the documentary seems to argue that these mechanisms, when overly stringent, dehumanise vulnerable people, turning borders into zones of exclusion rather than gateways to refuge. Refugees, fleeing war and persecution, often face rejection or hostility, raising questions about the balance between security and humanity.

The documentary also addresses the Syrian crisis, particularly the rise of ISIS, which exploited instability to perpetrate atrocities in the name of Islam, targeting civilians and minorities like the Kurds. The Assad government's failure to protect groups like the Kurds exacerbated displacement, pushing thousands toward Europe. This context underscores why refugees risk everything to escape, challenging Europe's reluctance to integrate them. The film likely critiques the blanket suspicion of refugees as potential threats, fueled by ISIS's actions, which overshadows the plight of innocent families. By juxtaposing state security measures with the human cost of exclusion, Rania's work calls for a reevaluation of policies to prioritise compassion without compromising safety, urging Europe to reconcile its values with its actions.

Globalisation, digital communication, and social media have driven a growing number of social movements to adopt visual communication strategies. Protestors utilise photographs as a vital tool to shape their message and connect with diverse national and international audiences (Doerr and

Milman, 2018). In *For Sama*, we visualise the protest of the civilians against the Syrian government. Behind creating the documentary is Waad, who is a victim of the civil war and a protester. It gave much more power to the documentary and the images captured in it. In both documentaries, small children have been depicted. Instead of the strategic manoeuvres of global conflicts, a single image of a child suffering from political violence can trigger a strong emotional and political response, crafting a vivid and straightforward narrative (Koo, 2018). Images of children under attack are powerful because they subtly infiltrate our consciousness, tapping into existing global political narratives to drive action and influence political landscapes (Koo, 2018). Both documentaries have shown vulnerable refugees mobilising support for humanitarian intervention and refugee assistance efforts. These visual trends have significant implications, as they influence how refugees are protected, integrated, and provided opportunities for safe and dignified lives (Johnson, 2018). The state has used violence to achieve its political goal, and the film directors have shown that violence is shown in visuals to achieve their political goal of a war-free state and the rights of refugees.

Rania and Waad's documentaries, as highlighted by Anishchenkova (2018), diverge significantly from Western media portrayals, which often rely on preconceived notions and stereotypes about the Syrian conflict. These Western narratives tend to frame issues through a lens of oversimplification or bias, presenting a homogenised view that may not fully capture the lived realities of those affected. In contrast, Rania and Waad's works offer authentic, ground-level perspectives, rooted in their personal experiences and unfiltered by external agendas. Their storytelling prioritises the voices of Syrians, countering the often one-dimensional depictions found in mainstream outlets.

Meanwhile, RT, a Russian state-run network, produces documentary-style content that selectively showcases Damascus, portraying pockets of normalcy and stability to project a narrative aligned with Russian interests.[i] This selective framing glosses over the broader devastation, serving as propaganda to counter Western critiques and bolster Russia's geopolitical stance. Such portrayals starkly contrast with the raw, unpolished footage captured by victims using mobile phones or compiled from authentic sources. These grassroots videos, often shared on social platforms, provide unmediated glimpses into the conflict's brutality, offering a counter-narrative to both Western and Russian media.

Support from Western outlets like The Guardian and Channel 4 News for Rania and Waad's documentaries underscores their credibility but also highlights tensions in global media dynamics. These collaborations reflect an attempt to amplify marginalised voices, yet they occur against the backdrop of Russia's longstanding rivalry with the West. This geopolitical friction shapes media narratives, with Russia leveraging platforms like RT to challenge Western dominance in global discourse. The contrast between state-driven propaganda, Western media's selective framing, and the raw authenticity of victim-generated content underscores the complex interplay of power, perception, and truth in documenting the Syrian crisis.

As a result, the Syrian crisis has gained much attention and policy response from the global community. Most of the states have urged an end to the crisis. The international response has been multifaceted, encompassing humanitarian aid, diplomatic efforts, and media amplification of individual stories, such as those of refugees like Rania and Waad, which have galvanised public support for war victims.

Nations across the world have urged an end to the violence, with many contributing substantial resources to alleviate suffering. Humanitarian assistance has included food, medical supplies, and shelter for displaced Syrians within and beyond the country's borders. Countries like Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, hosting millions of refugees, have received international funding to support overburdened infrastructure. Development and economic aid have also been pivotal, focusing on rebuilding communities and providing livelihoods for displaced families. Stabilisation efforts, particularly in areas liberated from conflict, aim to restore security and governance, preventing further escalation. For instance, European nations and the United States have committed billions in aid through organisations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), targeting both immediate relief and long-term recovery.

The personal stories of refugees like Rania and Waad have humanised the crisis, resonating deeply with global audiences. After gaining asylum in Britain and the United States, respectively,

both women shared their harrowing experiences through Western media outlets. Their interviews, broadcast on a famous media platform, detailed the loss, resilience, and hope that define the refugee experience. These narratives have sparked widespread empathy, driving donations to NGOs and influencing policy debates on asylum and resettlement. Rania's account of fleeing Aleppo and Waad's documentation of life under siege have become powerful symbols of the crisis, inspiring advocacy campaigns and fundraising efforts.

The global response, while significant, faces challenges, including political divisions and resource constraints. Yet, the combination of state-led aid, international cooperation, and the amplifying power of individual stories continues to sustain hope. By highlighting the human cost of the conflict, refugees like Rania and Waad have ensured that the Syrian crisis remains a priority, pushing the world to act with urgency and compassion.

Conclusion. First-person narrative documentaries have emerged as powerful vehicles for conveying the stark realities of the Syrian Civil War and its resulting refugee crisis, offering an unfiltered lens into the lived experiences of those directly affected. Unlike conventional documentaries, which may rely on third-party perspectives or editorialized narratives, the raw, unpolished footage captured by filmmakers like Rania Ali Mustafa and Waad Al-Kateab in *Escape from Syria: Rania's Odyssey* (2017) and *For Sama* (2019) provides an authentic portrayal of the trauma, resilience, and humanity of women navigating war and displacement. As both victims and storytellers, these women embody multiple roles—mothers, activists, refugees—infusing their narratives with a feminist perspective that challenges the often male-dominated depictions of conflict. The authenticity of their work stems from its immediacy: Rania's footage of fleeing ISIS-controlled Raqqa and Waad's documentation of life in besieged Aleppo capture visceral moments of destruction, fear, and hope. These films resonate globally because they humanise the 6.1 million Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers and 7.4 million internally displaced persons (UNHRC, 2024) by focusing on personal stories of loss and survival. By giving voice to their own experiences, Rania and Waad amplify the narratives of countless others, like Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy whose lifeless body on a Turkish beach in 2015 became an iconic image of the refugee crisis, galvanising global outrage and empathy. Their documentaries demand attention to the ongoing Syrian crisis, challenging the international community to confront its failures in protecting vulnerable populations and fostering peace. These films are not just stories; they are calls to action, exposing the human cost of political inaction and urging a reevaluation of global responsibilities toward refugees and war victims.

The courage of Rania and Waad to claim public space as Middle Eastern women filmmakers is a radical act in itself, given the systemic silencing of women's voices in both their region and global media landscapes. In a context where Middle Eastern women are often stereotyped as passive victims or marginalised in political discourse, their decision to wield media as a tool to narrate their experiences as war victims and refugees is both subversive and empowering. Rania, a Kurdish woman fleeing ISIS, and Waad, a mother documenting Aleppo's devastation, confront the erasure of their perspectives by presenting raw, unmediated truths that contrast with the often sanitised or agenda-driven portrayals of Western media. Their documentaries challenge the liberal democratic states of the West, which have frequently been reluctant to fully embrace Syrian refugees, as evidenced by restrictive policies in Europe and elsewhere. For instance, Rania's footage critiques the inhumane conditions of refugee camps and the bureaucratic barriers at borders, while Waad's work exposes the brutality of a war backed by foreign powers like Russia, raising questions about the West's complicity in prolonging the conflict. By sharing their stories, these women not only reclaim agency but also advocate for the millions of displaced Syrians, particularly women and children who remain voiceless. Their films serve as a bridge to global audiences, fostering empathy and challenging stereotypes, while highlighting the contradictions of Western liberal ideals that champion human rights yet often fail to extend them to refugees. This bold use of media underscores the transformative potential of visual storytelling in reshaping international perceptions and demanding accountability for the Syrian crisis. Through showing violence on screen, they tried to bring peace to Syria.

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