

Heart

of a *revolutionary*

Alumna helps tell the story of a Syrian civil war

By Jason Winders, MES'10

Mariam Hamou knows the numbers by heart. It is the names that haunt her.

"It is weird, but in war, all you hear about are the numbers – 200 people died in this, 13 people died in that. You know the numbers; you never know the names. And until you know the names, you cannot connect with the numbers."

Hamou, BA'96, MLIS'99, serves as the North American Public and Media Relations Director for the National Coalition of Syrian and Revolution and Opposition Forces. Based in Istanbul, Turkey, the organization is a collection of pro-democracy groups from both inside and outside Syria, widely supported by Western and Gulf governments. In her role, the London, Ont.-born Hamou connects with internal councils within Syria and international media outlets to get the message out.

"The important part of my work is getting across the stories of the normal, everyday people – the people facing all of this that the regime is doing, all of this that the regime has been doing throughout the revolution. I try to bring those stories across."

Born the daughter of a Lebanese mother, whose family goes five generations back in Canada, and a Syrian father, whose family still calls the Middle Eastern country home, Hamou and her activist-advocate heart have deep roots. Her father is politically active in Syria – the kind of active that draws attention. He had been imprisoned, even



tortured, under former Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, father of current Syrian president Bashar Hafez al-Assad. His visits to the country even today still draw official eyes.

Hamou's first visit to Syria as an adult did not come until she finished her undergraduate degree at Western. Once there, however, she fell in love with the people, the culture.

When pro-democracy protests erupted in March 2011, after the arrest and torture of teenagers who painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall, she stood ready to help.

"It wasn't even a protest at first. It was just words. Somebody wrote something on a wall. But you felt something was happening. And then I started getting messages from people in Syria saying 'It's started! It's started!' I was so excited we were going to do this. We were going to bring democracy to Syria. I was so full of hope and happiness.

"For my dad, this was personal. For me, this was personal."

As the revolution dawned, Hamou was working with London North Centre MP Glen Pearson, but when he lost to Conservative Susan Truppe in the 2011 Federal Election, Hamou was free to follow her heart. She reached out to her connections in the country. Pitching her political experience within a western democracy, she was recruited to do everything from government to media relations.

Admittedly, it was an uphill battle from the start.

"The pro-Assad groups were really good. They had the machine in place to get their message to the world. We had nothing. We were starting from scratch. We were starting from zero."

But the stories got out. Slowly. She found success in connecting with major international media, mainly "all these awesome American journalists," including working with New York Times best-selling authors Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan on their book, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*.

Inside the Army of Terror.

"We were quite successful with that. But it really didn't

change public policy," she said with obvious frustration in her voice. "There were so many things working against our message, our mission and what we were trying to do."

Her darkest hour came in August 2013.

That month, rockets containing the nerve agent sarin were fired into two opposition-controlled suburbs near Damascus, Syria. Investigators said the attack could only have been carried out by Syria's government, yet the Assad government blamed rebel forces. Hamou does not like to talk numbers without names, but the numbers were staggering and many of the names are still unknown. Death toll estimates range from 280-1,729 men, women and children. Media reports called it the deadliest chemical weapons attack since the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s.

The attack was a direct violation of U.S. President Barack Obama's 'red line' issued in remarks to reporters a year prior to the attack.

"For me, this was personal."



"When the massacre happened, we had assurances from the Obama Administration. We had spoken with them. We asked, 'If Assad crosses the 'red line,' will Obama go after Assad?' They promised they would," she said.

The four or five days after the attack were a blur of phone calls, emails and waiting.

"And then, when they said they weren't going to do it, that's when I thought something was up. Something was going on bigger than us. There was nothing we could do. The revolution was still going to be a revolution, but we had to do it without outside help. It was going to have to be organic and from within the people. It has gotten really complicated since.

"I still look back on that day and wonder what happened."

Everything has fallen to chaos since. More than 5 million people have fled the country. Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey have struggled to cope with one of the largest refugee exoduses in recent history. Even more refugees have sought safety in Europe. A further 6.5 million people have been displaced inside Syria.

The civil war has evolved significantly. After Obama refused to act, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces saw its influence on the ground erode. An opportunity had been missed.

Today, Hamou still works with the coalition connecting journalists with sources inside Syria, as well as doing think tank work to solve challenges facing the Syrian people. She also works with non-governmental organizations, including the United Nations, in providing relief to refugees.

When Canada welcomed more than 25,000 Syrian refugees, after the Liberal government rolled out its refugee resettlement in November 2015, Hamou helped resettle many of them in London. And while a worthwhile pursuit, she stresses the world cannot forget why these refugees exist.

"Everyone is so focused on refugees. But we aren't focused on why we have refugees. Everyone is worried about this – but they are not worried about what is causing this." **WAG**