

# Muhammad Najem, War Reporter: How One Boy Put the Spotlight on Syria

AUTHORS

**MUHAMMAD NAJEM AND NORA NEUS**

ILLUSTRATOR

**JULIE ROBINE**

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**RECOMMENDED FOR:** Lower to Mid Secondary  
(Violence)



## SYNOPSIS

Muhammad Najem was only eight years old when the war in Syria began. He was thirteen when his beloved Baba, his father, was killed in a bombing while praying. By fifteen, Muhammad didn't want to hide anymore—he wanted to act. He was determined to reveal what families like his were enduring in Syria: bombings by their own government and days hiding in dark underground shelters.

Armed with the camera on his phone and the support of his family, he started reporting on the war using social media. He interviewed other kids like him to show what they hope for and dream about. More than anything, he did it to show that Syrian kids like his toddler brother and infant sister, are just like kids in any other country. Despite unimaginable loss, Muhammad was always determined to document the humanity of the Syrian people. Eventually, the world took notice.

This tenderly illustrated graphic memoir is told by Muhammad himself along with CNN producer Nora Neus, who helped break Muhammad's story and bring his family's plight to an international audience.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Muhammad Najem is an internationally recognised journalist from Eastern Ghouta, Syria. He began his reporting career as a child, under near-constant bombardment by the Assad regime, by taking videos on his cheap cell phone and posting them on social media. His story went viral in 2018, putting a target on his and his family's backs. In 2019, he and his family fled Syria and moved to Turkey. Muhammad loves video games, association football, hanging out with friends, and playing with his little brother and sister. He invites you to visit him at [muhammadnajem.com](http://muhammadnajem.com).

Nora Neus is an Emmy-award nominated journalist and writer living in Brooklyn, New York. She has reported from inside a maximum-security prison, from 14,000 feet above sea level in the San Juan Mountains, and from rural Puerto Rico after devastating earthquakes. Nora studied the Syrian conflict for her MA in War Studies from King's College London. She started her journalism career as a child, writing a newspaper called *Neus News* for her family and friends. She invites you to visit her at [noraneus.com](http://noraneus.com).

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Julie Robine is a French-American designer and illustrator based in Brooklyn. Since graduating from RISD in 2015, she has worked on a wide variety of projects, with clients like Little, Brown & Co., Victory Magazine, Barnes & Noble, and

more. A middle child, she has been drawing since realising it was the only thing she was better at than her sisters. Her favourite things include horror podcasts and learning about maligned women in history. She loves drawing characters and crafting their worlds, and reading as many graphic novels as possible. You can find her on Instagram [@heyhijulie](#) and at [julierobine.com](#).

## STUDY NOTES

- Before reading the story, as a class, discuss the book cover and title. Some things to include in your discussion could be:
  - What do you think the artwork on the cover is showing?
  - Who do you think is pictured on the cover?
  - What can you tell about the main character from the cover artwork?
  - Do you think this book is fiction or nonfiction? Why do you think this?
  - What are the planes in the background doing? How can you tell this?
  - Where is Syria, and why might a spotlight need to be put on it?
- What is the Arab Spring? When was it, what happened during it, and why did it affect Syria? Research online or in the library, and create a short informative report on at least one of the major events that occurred during the Arab Spring. Share your report with the class, and as a class discuss how all these different events might have triggered the unrest in Syria that Muhammad lived through.
- Create a timeline of events in Syria as Muhammad experienced them, using the events in the book, the timeline on pp 18 and 19 and the information on pp 118 and 119. Write one sentence about each scene or chapter to describe it, and illustrate your completed timeline with vignettes showing some of the key events.
- Read Muhammad’s father’s words to him on p 17. Do you agree that having something worth losing makes you lucky? In small groups discuss your thoughts around this statement, and share your conclusions and reasoning with another group.
- Re-read the conversation between Muhammad and Firas on p 50. How important do you think Firas’ statement was to Muhammad’s decision to report on what was happening in Syria?
- Muhammad was fifteen when he first started reporting on what was happening in Syria. At that point there had been air raids and fighting going on since he was eight years old. On pp 76 and 77 he describes what was going on in terms of a bunch of dogs fighting over a chew toy. How do you think his experiences affected his decision to become a reporter, and share the reality of life in Syria with the world? How does looking at the picture on pp 76 and 77 make you feel? Individually, craft a creative response to this imagery and to Muhammad’s story so far. Your response might be a written piece, a poem or a work of art of your own.
- Muhammad and his family all love to eat Hiba’s yebrak. In the very back of the book, Hiba has been kind enough to share her recipe with you. In small groups talk about the recipe, and if you have access to the ingredients and cooking equipment, try making and eating some! Research traditional Syrian meals online, and find some that might take a little less effort (and skill!) to prepare than yebrak does. As a class, use your research to help you create a Syrian class feast (be mindful of any allergies).
- As a class, read and discuss Muhammad’s description of the siege of Eastern Ghouta.
- Re-read pages 130 to 139. What happened with Selim’s sister and cousins? What in the visual narrative on pp 136 and 137 tells us this? As a class, discuss the symbolism in the book (and in Muhammad’s life) of the stars in the sky.
- Why did Muhammad think that his reports being on CNN would make the bombing stop? Why didn’t it?
- If you had seen one of Muhammad’s initial reports or tweets, what message would you have sent him?
- Re-read pp 155–159. As a class, discuss why Russian state-sponsored accounts might want to claim Muhammad’s reports were ‘fake news’. Some things to think about in your discussion might be:
  - Who would be posting this type of comment?
  - Who would benefit from most of the viewers believing Muhammad was an actor?
  - Why might Russia care about what was happening in Syria?
  - How does international public opinion affect events—or does it?
  - Which group of people uses the catch cry ‘fake news’ the most, and why?

- When Muhammad and his family arrived in Idlib, they were greeted by local people who gifted each of them a bowl of fruit. Muhammad's little sister Batul did not believe it at first—she had never seen such an amazing bounty of fresh fruit before! Write a first person account of this scene from her point of view.
- How does Muhammad feel when he first sees planes over Idlib?
- Why were Assad's aircraft targeting Idlib?
- How did Muhammad posting Fatima's story help her to get a prosthetic leg?
- What has this book taught you about Syria, and about what it is like to grow up in a war zone?
- Do you think that it is easy to be a reporter? As a class, discuss what it takes to be a reporter—especially one who is using a phone to take selfie video reports. Think about something that is important to your community, and in small groups take footage and compile it into a video report on the topic to share with your class or school.
- Before you read this book, what did you know about Syria and the people who live there? What have you learnt that you would otherwise have never known?
- Why is it important that we share stories about what is happening in places such as Syria? What are some other parts of the world where people who just want to live their lives are now suffering because of war?
- Go online, and watch one of Muhammad's video reports of the war in Syria. In small groups, discuss what you saw and heard, and how it made you feel to watch it.
  - Individually, write a brief description of the video, mentioning what happened and how it made you feel.
- What did you find to be the most emotionally charged part of Muhammad's story? How did it make you feel? Paint a picture inspired by your emotional response to his story.
- Read the Afterword at the back of the book. Did Muhammad's life continue the way you thought that it would?

AUTHOR OF NOTES  
**RAE CARLYLE**