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Training Syria's Elite Rescue Force

How a group of ill-equipped civilian volunteers has saved 3,700 lives since 2013.

SWEATING IN THE 104-degree heat in Adana, Turkey, former British infantry officer James Le Mesurier is training a group of average Syrians to become members of the U.S.-funded Syria Civil Defense (SCD) team, an elite crew of battle-ready first responders. It's September, and amid the confusion of President Bashar al-Assad's bombing campaigns against rebel factions and the U.S. airstrikes against ISIS, the 25-man SCD teams are working to save civilian lives. Le Mesurier's job is to get them ready — by re-creating an urban war zone at the SCD training center near the Syrian border. "We sourced all the materials to be exactly like what you'd find in Aleppo," he says, an unlit cigarette hanging from his

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lips as he stands beside the course's broken concrete and twisted metal. "If you're not killed in the blast, you can get trapped and then die from dehydration, bleeding out, or organ failure within 72 hours." Le Mesurier, 43, lights up: "Syria. It's the Mount Everest of war zones — an absolute nightmare."

To help save Syrians on the front line, the U.S. has funded \$13 million so far in humanitarian aid to civil defense teams like the SCD. "It's one of the most important things we can do to increase the effectiveness and legitimacy of civil authorities in liberated areas of Syria," says Mark Ward, a senior State Department official leading the U.S. government's Syria assistance team. "It enables Syrian civilians to do something tangible in the face of the regime's atrocities.

There's nothing that brings a community together more than efforts to rescue people."

While the sun creeps overhead, Le Mesurier's trainees begin their day's mission: to break into the concrete and save a child. As the founder of the nonprofit Mayday Rescue, Le Mesurier hosts groups of Syrian civil defenders — former bakers, tailors, students, and ice cream vendors; "regular dudes," he calls them — at the training center, where they learn how to tunnel into collapsed buildings, put out fires, splint broken femurs, treat bullet holes, and tourniquet missing limbs.

Paid occasional stipends from local Syrian councils — often funded by donor governments like the U.S. — SCD members are required to work various jobs for a living

when not responding to bombs. The volunteer force is also required to rescue anybody: rebels, regime soldiers, even ISIS extremists. “It’s absolutely true that the allies help fund a group that will rescue people they’re bombing,” Le Mesurier says. “Right to life is universal. According to the Geneva Conventions, even soldiers deployed in combat zones are instructed to provide first aid to enemy combatants, assuming they no longer present a threat.” But it’s innocent civilians who most benefit from the SCD. One of the trainees, Khaled Oman Harah, 29, relates a 14-hour odyssey of breaking through seven feet of concrete in Aleppo to rescue a 10-day-old boy. “After saving him, I couldn’t speak for a half hour,” he says. “I have kids. I cried.”

Hearing Syrians’ wartime stories is what compelled Le Mesurier to start the training center. Born in Singapore and raised in England, he followed his father into the military, graduating at the top of his class from the prestigious Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and then joining the Royal Green Jackets — the U.K. equivalent of the U.S. Army Rangers. Le Mesurier was deployed in Northern Ireland and Kosovo, but it was in Bosnia where he realized humanitarian aid was more effective at quelling war than an army. He left the military, worked for the UN and then the EU, but soon became disillusioned with “organizations that no one can describe as effective.”

Le Mesurier eventually began working for private security companies like Good Harbor, run by Richard Clarke, the former Bush administration counter-terrorism czar who famously accused Bush and Cheney of committing war crimes. Instead of the guys-with-guns operations of the private security

From top: Le Mesurier at the SCD training site in Turkey in September; trainees practice search-and-rescue drills.



world, Le Mesurier led “humanitarian portfolios and odd jobs.” He trained several thousand citizens to become the oil and gas field protection force for the UAE, designed security infrastructure for Abu Dhabi — “everything from the potential of sea-level rise to political uprisings, shit you just don’t think of, so you’re sitting down with futurists in New York talking about what the world will be like in 30 years” — and ensured the safety of the 2010 Gulf Cup in Yemen, a regional soccer tournament held in the midst of fears of a potential Al Qaeda uprising. But eventually Le Mesurier became dissatisfied

and wanted to make a more direct impact on the communities he was working in. “At the end of the day, that market is about guys with guns,” he says. “The idea of being a civilian carrying a weapon and guiding a convoy in a conflict zone — that leaves me cold.”

Syria proved the perfect fit for Le Mesurier. In 2013, with help from Turkey’s elite natural-disasters response team, AKUT, and \$300,000 of seed funding from Japan, the U.K., and the U.S., he launched the first seven-day SCD course to teach 25 vetted Syrians how to deal with the chaos erupting around them. Within two days of finishing Le Mesurier’s course, they saved their first life in Syria. Now over 700 Syrians have gone through the training process and rescued more than 3,700 people from the country’s bombed-out rubble, using anything at hand from Leatherman tools to fire trucks. “They are ordinary members of the community who had a choice about how they were going to deal with their set of circumstances: Pick up a gun, join one of the militias, become a refugee, run away, or stay and do this,” he says. “They stayed. They are absolute fucking heroes.”

The SCD pledge to help anyone in need is crucial to Le

Mesurier. He believes the SCD has to maintain its autonomy within the country, and that includes limiting his own role — he has not set foot within Syria since the revolution began. Le Mesurier fears his presence alongside the team would compromise its local integrity. “One of the most challenging things is preventing outside political actors from trying to co-opt civil defense,” he says. Everyone from ISIS imams to provincial councils has tried to use the SCD to their own gain. “If that happens,” he says, “the whole operation is undermined.”

Although one in seven SCD members can expect to be killed or severely injured, the teams have a 98 percent retention rate. “These are things these guys have to deal with on a daily basis,” Le Mesurier says, pulling out his smartphone to check in on recent trainees now operating in Syria. He scrolls through the latest updates: How many strikes today? How many dead? Our guys have any injuries? Le Mesurier looks up and says, “One of the Idlib guys was badly burned.” He shows a picture. Aside from two eyes and a mouth grinning at the camera, it’s just white bandages wrapping a body.

Le Mesurier puts away his phone and lights a fresh cigarette as the team breaks through the concrete and tunnels inside. “None of my previous jobs have had the same impact as civil defense,” he says, smiling as the trainees emerge triumphantly from the drill. “In a very direct and obvious way, lives are being saved. It’s easy to justify to myself why this is meaningful work.” ■

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