Documentation

Syria –
From Revolt to Regional War?

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Ladies and gentlemen,
I am very happy to welcome you, so many of you, here to our panel discussion on Syria – From Revolt to Regional War?
My name is Magda Seewald and I’m a project coordinator at VIDC. My special welcome tonight goes to our speakers, Salwa Ismail and Razan Ghazzawi. I’m very happy that you came all the way to Vienna. Thank you for coming. I would also like to thank the Austrian Development Cooperation for its financial support for this event tonight and the Diplomatic Academy for their cooperation, as well as my colleagues from VIDC, especially Michael Fanizadeh, for supporting me in the organization of this event. And last but not least, I would like to thank the interpreters for tonight, Gabriele Gallo and Brigitte Ornauer.

Tonight’s lecture is the final event of this year’s festival Salam Orient and I would like to take the opportunity to thank Norbert Ehrlich, the organizer of this festival, for our long lasting cooperation. Thank you, Norbert.

Let me come now to tonight’s content. Throughout the lecture series on the Arab uprisings, the VIDC has analyzed the uprisings from different perspectives. We have looked at social movements in the region, on the role of Islam within the rebellions, and on Western and Arab interventions in the uprisings. In March this year we analyzed the impact the rebellions have on gender relations in the region. And two weeks ago we focused on the Kurds in the region, mostly in Turkey, Iraq and Syria. But while the prior events concentrated mostly on Egypt, today our focus is on Syria.

When the uprising in Syria started in February 2011, Mubarak in Egypt had just been dismissed and in Tunisia President Ben Ali had just fled the country. The hopes for overcoming the authoritarian regime in Syria seemed possible. However, soon after the outbreak of the revolt and the violent response by the regime the uprising became more and more violent. Today a wide range of actors are involved in the conflict, from jihadi movement, like the ISIS movement we have heard so much about in the last weeks, to parties supported by the West. At the political and geostrategic level, the war has already become a regional one.

Today the Syrian war can hardly be described by words. With more than 150,000 deaths, massive destruction and currently the biggest refugee movement worldwide, the social devastation as well as millions of traumatized people are not only direct consequences of the war, but will determine the future of the country and its people for many years to come. But who are the different warring parties and what views on the country’s future do they have? Is it possible to have a democratic perspective beyond safeguarding power and geopolitics, when considering the developments in Syria? What could such a perspective look like and who could give it a push from inside the country? These are some of the questions being discussed tonight by our speakers Salwa Ismail and Razan Ghazzawi. They will share with us their experiences and perspectives as researcher and activist.
Let me now briefly introduce to you our chair of tonight’s panel, Helmut Krieger. He’s a consultant for the VIDC, a social scientist, and a lecturer at the Department of Development Studies at University of Vienna. He has just finished his APPEAR project on conflict, participation and development in Palestine. His new publication, “Umkämpfte Staatlichkeit: Palästina zwischen israelischer Okkupation, neoliberaler Entwicklung und politischem Islam” will soon be released. Lastly I have some administrative remarks. On your chair you’ll find feedback sheets. I kindly ask you to give us your comments and critiques and drop the sheet in the red box outside. I also recommend our next event; it will take place on the 14th of November at the Hauptbücherei am Gürtel. It will be a book presentation of Najem Wali, Bagdad Marlboro. You’ll find more information outside. So I wish us all now an interesting debate, and ask Helmut now to introduce the panel to us. Thank you.

Helmut Krieger

Thank you very much Magda, and thanks a lot to the VIDC for facilitating this panel discussion. Ladies and gentlemen, I welcome you all to this lecture on Syria - from Revolt to Regional War? It’s my distinct pleasure to chair this session, this discussion on Syria, and we are certainly very pleased to welcome Razan Ghazzawi and Professor Salwa Ismail.

As Magda already mentioned, the subject of today’s event is a critical analysis on the situation in Syria from activist as well as academic perspectives. Magda has already raised some important questions that range from the relation between politics and sectarianism and violence to the possibilities of grassroots activities in today’s Syria. And I hope we can at least answer some of the questions you have raised despite their complexities and the limited time we have.

Before we get started, let me briefly introduce Razan Ghazzawi and Professor Salwa Ismail. Razan is a feminist activist and blogger from Syria; she received a diploma in English literature from Damascus University in 2003 and obtained a master’s degree in comparative literature from the University of Balamand in Lebanon in 2011. After returning to Syria she became the media officer in the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression in the Arab World. Due to her political activity, she was arrested by the Syrian regime twice: in November 2011 and in February 2012. Also due to her political activity, as blogger and campaigner, she was honored with the Human Rights Defender’s At Risk award by the Dublin based Frontline Defenders Foundation in June 2012.

Razan had to flee the country and is currently based in Turkey, where she worked as a campaign manager of the NGO Syrian Women’s Network. I think she left that job about a week ago.

We are also very pleased to welcome Salwa Ismail. Salwa is a professor of politics with reference to the Middle East at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. She holds a PhD from McGill University in Montreal. Her research focuses on everyday forms of government, urban governance and the politics of space. She has been widely published on Islamist politics and on state society relations in the Middle East. Therefore, I will only name a few of her publications. She is the author of Rethinking...
I left Syria ten months ago and it’s been a bit difficult to think and process the experiences of the past three years as a refugee—an unregistered refugee. Since I am also an American, I cannot actually register as a refugee. So I will talk briefly about how it started and my own experiences and the people that I’ve met. And how it has transformed me and taught me a lot and how the revolution made me face myself and my imperfections and made me mature a bit. I’ll focus more on the women’s role in the revolution. For the most part, this is what I’m going to be talking about.

The revolution has opened spaces for every person who wants to join it. When I finished my master’s, I always wanted to do my PhD in the US. When the revolution started in Tunisia, a lot of Syrians only thought about staying in Syria and not emigrating and not leaving and not continuing their studies or even emigrating and just having a better job. They wanted to make a home in Syria. And that’s how I started to organize meetings anonymously and underground. We went to meet in spaces that were inside our friends’ spaces. We could not meet in cafés because someone would hear us and they would report us and would detain us. So we had to meet in safe homes and safe zones. We had to meet a lot of people, people we didn’t know, and yet we didn’t fear them because we assumed that meeting one another at this point meant that we were ok. Like, we’re not going to cheat on each other, we’re not going to report each other—which for a lot of people is risky. I was first detained because one of the people who attended these meetings reported me and others to the regime. He...
was an intelligence guy. I’m just saying that at the time we kind of risked ourselves, because what we really wanted to do was change the situation that was going on in Syria. Not many Syrians thought about having a future in Syria. The revolution changed that.

When the revolution started, one thing which was left out of the media was that women were a huge part of that: due to sexism in society—patriarchal societies—they do have special care for women. A woman should be protected by the men around her—she cannot go alone to a protest. This also made a lot of the security forces choose not to target women systematically. They targeted men, which left a lot of room for women to move and deliver aid and protest and be photographers and be media workers.

In 2011 many of the demonstrations were organized in neighborhoods. Women were watching from the street corners to see if someone from the intelligence or security forces was walking by. On the 7th of July, 2012, when the FSA [Free Syrian Army] entered Damascus for the first time to attempt to liberate Damascus, I was in Midan, and the most organized cells that delivered aid and broke the siege, smuggled doctors and paramedics in and out, were women. It actually was women’s cells in Damascus suburbs. They were the ones who supported the non-violent movement in Damascus and its suburbs. Even during very dangerous times like Ramadan—it’s well-known in Syria that during Ramadan the security forces are very strict on aid being smuggled inside the siege areas. Many of these women were not covered in the media; for example Razan Zeitounah and Samira Khalil were the lucky ones to have media attention.

Razan Zeitounah is a human rights lawyer. She worked in Syria as a lawyer before the revolution. She defended the detainees. She is famous for even defending detainees who did not share her political views. She is secular and believes in human rights and democracy, and yet she would defend an Islamist who thinks that we want Islamic states. At the time, when Bashar Assad was still in power, Razan had to live underground for two years: 2011 and 2012. The regime could not get to her. She co-founded LCC, a local coordination committee, which is a news agency, the first news agency in Syria to deliver news that was anti-regime propaganda. She’s also the co-founder of VDC, which is a violation documentation center that documents violations committed mostly by the regime as well as violations committed by the different armed groups in Syria. It documents the detainees, the marchers, and it delivers that report to the UN. VDC is accredited by the UN itself.

Samira Khalil as well, she’s a politician who was detained during the Hafez al-Assad era. Both worked till it became almost impossible for them to continue their non-violent, peaceful work in Damascus and then they went to Douma, a liberated area in the Damascus suburbs. Razan especially started to publish reports about violations committed by groups controlling Douma. That was one of the reasons why they were kidnapped by an armed group. We have no information whatsoever about Razan and Samira and her husband Wael Hamada and Nazim Hamadi. The four of them were raided and kidnapped on the 9th of December 2013 from their office at VDC in Douma. We have launched several campaigns calling for their release, trying to pressure the armed group and
trying to pressure Qatar and the US, because they have connections with some of the groups that are operating in Douma.

We were talking about how women have had an enormous role in strengthening the non-violent struggle in Syria, trying to shape it, trying to shape its discourse. What is important about that is that it changed the dynamics and the gender roles that were strengthened during the Assad regime. I’ll give an example from the protest. Someone who’s conservative and religious could not hold the hand of a woman, but during the shellings, he would grab her hand and take her to hide. We were demonstrating in Berzeh when the regime started to bomb the area. It’s a working class neighborhood in Damascus. One of the women was injured and died. We had to carry her inside the mosque. We were unveiled, my friend and I, and helped the women to clean the dead woman, because that is their ritual to prepare her for mourning. We could not bury her in the graveyard because it was being shelled, so we had to go and bury her in the garden. We were not veiled for something like four hours inside the mosque and yet none of the men and women came to us and told us that it was haram and we could not do that, or that we were disrespecting God or whatever. Because we were being shelled a new dynamic was created, for people to accept each other, to be around each other—changing the dynamics between sexes and genders. It created new forms of existing on the ground and being together against the violence of the regime. But only four hours later after the woman was buried did two women come to us and say, ‘you know, this is a mosque and you should be covered.’

One of the things that is also changing within the revolution is the dynamic of women and their relationship with their families. A lot of the women, who could not leave their homes without the permission of their parents before the revolution, would now say to their parents, ‘you know what, I’m leaving. Goodbye.’ And they would go and disappear for months, they would go underground, they would move from one area to another, from one city to another and try to focus on the revolution. There is another thing I would like to mention here: a lot of women who were forced to wear the veil in their families challenged their families by unveiling, by taking away their veils. They have been receiving a lot of problems from their colleagues and the revolution itself, actually.

These are some of the women-only organized protests in very conservative areas. Daria is one such conservative area, but the women there do enormous, amazing feminist work. For example, they go to the houses of the detainees and marchers, and talk to their wives and try to help each other create handicrafts and support themselves financially. Now they have a women’s center in Lebanon, it is also led by one of the leaders of these protests. They are trying to help integrate Syrian refugees within the Lebanese society, despite the mounting problems and conflicts that Lebanon is now facing with the Syrian refugee crisis and ISIS.

Another important voice in the revolution is Samar Yazbek. Samar Yazbek is a novelist. And she has voiced fierce critique against the regime. She was threatened by some of her family members, because she’s an Alawite. Samar was accused by Alawite leaders of betraying the
Samar Yazbek

Samar Yazbek is the founder of Soriyat for Human Development, which has seven women’s centers in Syria and in neighboring countries right now: three or four in Damascus, two in Idlib, one in the Damascus suburbs and two in Lebanon and in Turkey. Samar wrote a diary—it’s actually available in English [and German1]. When the regime started to increase its violence against the peaceful protestors it became almost impossible to continue work inside regime-controlled areas without being detained. And detention became a kind of slippery slope to death, because death under torture’s been increasing in numbers. This made a lot of the peaceful activists and non-violent activists leave Syria for neighboring countries like Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. And some of those activists could not remain in Syria, like Razan and Samira.

Aleppo is a very conservative city and it’s kind of segregated. Christians have their own neighborhoods and Armenians and also Muslims. It is almost like you’re from Aleppo and yet not from Aleppo. This is a huge debate right now, because a lot of people are from the Aleppo suburbs inside the city. A lot of Syrian writers are writing that what we see in Aleppo today is the hate of those who live in Aleppo but are from Aleppo’s suburbs, against the people from Aleppo city proper, because they were marginalized for the past forty years, whereas the city was moving and improving financially.

When FSA began to be a factor inside Syria and started liberating a lot of lands, especially in the north, in Idlib—in Aleppo’s suburbs as well—some of these activists left controlled areas and went to liberated areas, like myself in 2013. I went to Idlib, which is a liberated area but is subjected to regime violence by barrel bombs, jets, and rockets. And it’s an area that is cut off from electricity, from water, from services. It’s also a male homogenous area. It is controlled by a bunch of men carrying guns. It is very difficult for a woman to be active in such areas. I was there in Kafranbel, a village in the Idlib suburbs. It’s two hours away from Turkey. I founded Karama Bus for Psychosocial Support. It was very difficult for me to stay there. I stayed there for almost a year. One of the reasons I left was, there was no one else. There was no family, no friends, and no one, just me and the people in the village. And the people in the village are segregated. There are men and women. Men were occupying all the space, the media, the medical section. Women then created a women’s center, where women could go and see each other and lobby and meet and discuss their issues and affairs in the new reality that they’re facing. Their situation has been changing a lot ever since. They’re trying to talk about why they’re not part of the revolutionary work. Why don’t they have Internet, how come they cannot go and apply for a job at one of the institutions organized by the revolution? How come the revolutionaries have more privileges than they have? All of these questions started to emerge inside those women’s centers. The women there are revolutionaries, they are occupying spaces, and they are managing all the work of the revolution.

Om Khaled is a hairdresser in Kafranbel. She is the only woman in Kafranbel who can drive. She is the financial supporter of her family. And she is also the hottest woman in Kafranbel. And actually she is the reason why a lot of woman right now talk instead of just sitting at

1 Yazbek, Samar: Schrei nach Freiheit. Bericht aus dem Inneren der syrischen Revolution (2012)
Om Khaled

Soad Nofal is an amazing leader inside Raqqa. Raqqa was occupied by ISIS and Soad was one of the very few women to stand in front of ISIS and to challenge them. She used to go to hold a stick in front of their base and one time they shot at her. Soad was forced to leave Raqqa eventually because she received death threats and now she’s based in Turkey in Ankara.

Marcel Shewaro - you cannot talk about Aleppo if you don’t mention Marcel. That’s Marcel basically. Marcel is one of the major organizers of the protest. Her existence as a female inside a very conservative and very male homogenous area like Aleppo is enormous. And she had to win a lot of battles for herself as a believer, as a Christian believer. Most of us are either agnostic or atheist, like my people. And it was very difficult for her to be a Christian believer among Muslim believers, which is very interesting in the revolution as well. Because, as I was saying, Aleppo is very segregated.

The first time she met a Muslim was in her college days. This is Aleppo. In Damascus we had neighbors as children who were Christians, it’s not something weird. But in Aleppo it’s weird, obviously. But Marcel is one of the very few female protestors who remained in Aleppo. She had to leave once and then came back after she got her master’s in human rights. She remained in Aleppo as women were leaving, as activists were leaving—even male ones. One time as she was organizing a protest in solidarity with the martyrs, an armed group came and asked her to put the veil on, but she refused to wear the veil and was detained for a day. A comrade was in solidarity with her and he stayed with her in prison until they formed a sit-in to release her. She finally signed the papers saying that she would put on the veil as she was leaving. And that’s how she left Aleppo for Turkey: wearing the veil. It would be very difficult for her to come back, but I’m sure she’ll come back again.

One of the last things I want to say before I finish is that the non-violent peaceful revolution that existed in 2011 has inspired a lot of us to stay in the country and to fight this regime. And yet most of us are outside the country right now. And most of us are depressed and most of us don’t know what we’re going to do. Some of us have separate paths; some of us are going to study, some of us are going to stay. Some of us can’t stay and can’t leave and that’s why we’re in Turkey trying to figure out what to do next. But what I know is that there are people still inside the country and they’re trying to do their best. And some people have
paid the price to do that. And I think what we should support these very people who remain in the country, because this is our path to a better future. Even though it’s very difficult, I do think that these people, despite the huge, enormous challenges they’re facing, feel that their job must be continued—even though it’s very difficult. Thank you.

Salwa Ismail

Thank you. First of all I would like to thank the organizers, the Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation, and of course Magda and Helmut for all their work that they put into organizing this event and all of the others in the institute. We’ve heard from Razan about, really, this heroic struggle of the Syrian people against an extremely violent regime, struggling for just some basic rights, civil rights, political liberty and really dignity, human dignity first and foremost. I think that was so central to why the uprising happened.

In this talk I want to address two questions, the question of sectarianism and to what extent sectarianism is actually inherent to the Syrian people and the Syrian polity, and the question of the nature of violence, this extreme violence that we’ve seen, that has been unleashed by the regime and kind of drew in some of the opposition with the militarization of segments of the opposition—and finally of course with Syria being drawn into a regional conflict, a geopolitical conflict that involves an ongoing struggle between a number of players at the regional level as well as global level. So that involves on one side the Saudis, Turkey—not necessarily that they’re working together—and Qatars on the other, Iran and the Russians. And of course we have the Americans, their position is not necessarily clear. The American administration supported the protest against the regime, called for an opening up, and also supported the idea of the regime’s departure, but in the end now we do see that their involvement is back to some of their own geostrategic interests that have been framed in terms of the War on Terror and so on. I actually don’t want to speak as much about the geopolitics, because I’m not a geopolitical analyst. I’m someone who works on domestic politics and on ordinary people’s lives and their relationship with government, how people relate to government and how they act and why they act.

Razan gave us the last few years of the uprising and details of individuals who all have participated in the uprising. And I want to step back and talk about why the uprising happened and also why the Syrians continue in their struggle despite the massive cost they’re paying in terms of life and in terms of the destruction. I mean: one question, when we look at the level of destruction—we’d say—was it worth it? Why continue the struggle? We see the destruction of Aleppo, we see destruction of cities across the country. We have upwards of three million people displaced and refugees, and a total of eight million displaced. It seems a huge price to be paying, so why pay that price? And I think in order to understand that we need to step back and ask: how were Syrians living under that regime? What kind of regime was governing Syria? I would say that a key understanding is that this is a regime governed by violence. Violence was a modality of governance. Syrians in their everyday, they knew that should they oppose the al-Assad regime, they would face
tremendous violence against them. And there was a template and a modality of government that was set back in the late ‘70s and the early ‘80s when the regime, under the guise of or in the name of countering the Islamist opposition—Islamist insurgency in Hamah, in Aleppo—actually destroyed much of the old city of Hamah and killed somewhere between ten thousand and forty thousand—we don’t know the exact number, but we know a large number of people were killed.

What we see in the Syrian uprising today is not something new, and that’s that regime violence has been there, has been there from earlier on. It’s always below the surface. It comes out at different moments. I would say that this modality of government, violence as a modality of government, was composed of two things. One, the use of prison—one could say the internment camp—which was so central to how the Syrian regime governed Syrians, and the other is the massacre.

In the uprising we did see a lot of massacres. First by security forces or by pro regime militants or loyalists who are referred to as the Shabiha, the armed gangs, thugs who were involved in some of the earlier massacres against civilians who were protesting. We have a number of massacres that happened from the early days of the uprising. But this kind of modality or this template or this mode of government was established earlier on from the early days of the Assad regime and its kind of spectacular manifestation was with Hamah and the destruction of that city. So, again, there was the camp or the prison that was used on a large scale. Under the Assad regime the estimates are that one hundred thousand people went through prison. Twenty thousand of them were imprisoned in Tadmor, the Palmyra prison. That is an internment camp. Many of these people have perished and many have stayed there for somewhere between ten, twenty years.

Syria actually, under Assad, both Assad Senior and Assad Junior, had the longest living serving political prisoners in the world. One of them served up to twenty-nine years. Many of its political activists, dissidents and so on, ended up being in jail for a long, long period. We have someone like Riad al Turk, who is referred to as Syria’s Mandela. He was in prison for nineteen years. We have someone like Yassin al-Haj Saleh imprisoned at the age of twenty, spending sixteen years in jail between different prisons, including Palmyra. So we have the best of Syrian society’s activists, intellectuals, writers, youth, who were just disagreeing with the mode of government, with the Syrian regime, ending up in prison or ending up actually being killed. Because there were extra-judicial killing in prisons, particularly in the early ‘80s. There were prison massacres; one of the main prison massacres was in 1980 against the Muslim Brotherhood. Somewhere between 700 and 1,000 Muslim Brotherhood members were killed in Palmyra. And of course we know that in 2008 under Bashar Assad there was another massacre with a large number of prisoners, I think mainly who identified with the Islamist groups.

So that level of violence as a way of governing people, we can expect that it will bring about fierce opposition. Once the opposition came up to the surface it was not possible to stop it and we may think, well is it worth it? Well, I think for the human beings defending their sense of dignity, once they’d started doing that it was very difficult for them to say ‘we can go back to live under such a brutal dictatorship.’ Even when you say, ‘but Aleppo is destroyed,’ ‘but you’ve got millions of refugees,’—but actually they’re fighting for some basic rights and dignity, which is so fundamental for a human being to continue living. So I think we need to take this into account to understand why we have the continuation of the uprising and the fierce way in which Syrians are persisting. Now of course we have the proliferation of armed groups and also the intervention of foreign fighters with a group like ISIS or some of the other smaller groups, but that’s not the Syrian uprising. The foreign
fighters, the armed groups represent a small segment of the Syrian population and of the Syrian revolution. The Syrian revolution includes all of the people that Razan talked about. It includes these women activists, it includes many youths.

I can tell you about my experience, the kind of people that I discussed the uprising with in the earlier days in Damascus in March, April, until May of 2011 during my fieldwork, which I started at the end of 2010 after the outbreak of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt with the idea that this was now a chance for overthrowing very brutal regimes. The Ben Ali regime, which was very oppressive, was not very different actually from al-Assad regime. A security state, a police state where, I remember in the late 1990s during a visit in Tunisia, I was told that one in six was a police informant. And it’s not terribly different than what happened in Syria, whereby you had an extensive apparatus of security and intelligence services that were monitoring people’s conversations, like Razan was saying. You could not have a conversation—particularly during the uprising or the beginning of the uprising—in a coffee shop or have a small gathering without actually being surrounded by police, by security forces. They are very present on the streets; they are very present in formal, in civilian clothes. You can identify them, they’re known, even though they’re not wearing uniforms. You know because they wear something like uniforms, the kind of suits they wear and so on, you can see them on street corners, in city squares and so on. So the presence of these security services in people’s lives was to control them politically, but also it was suppressing them or exploiting them.

There was a lot of corruption, whereby the members of the security forces were also extorting, were extortionists. They were taking, putting levies on people to get money from them. So, for instance in the early days of the uprising one of the demands that came from the coastal area, from Baniyas or Latakia—which was actually brought back from there from Samar Yazbek during one of her visits in the coastal area—was a statement put out by the fisherman from the coastal area saying they were just tired of the security services coming and imposing levies on them and threatening them that if they didn’t pay them, they were going to accuse them of insulting the president. So the level of the political and the social were very much mixed. You could not really conduct your everyday life without having the security apparatus’ heavy hand on you. Syrians say they had to walk by the wall, meaning keep your head down, don’t look at the regime official in the eye, don’t question, and don’t protest. They will tell you they lived twenty, thirty years like that. We had a younger generation and these are the people that in the early days of the uprising I was talking to and telling, ‘You know the regime is very violent. You can end up with a kind of a massive violent response.’

The youth were very full of hope when looking at the example of Egypt and of Tunisia, where the people who were just speaking out and breaking the wall of fear could help bring down the regime. They were hopeful. They also understood that they took a chance, and one could say perhaps there was naiveté, not realizing the extent to which the violence that the regime would bring on them in order to stay in power. We have different perceptions. I do remember speaking to seasoned political analysts and to a dissident who had been imprisoned in April, in early April 2011, who said that the talk from insiders or people close to the regime was that the army generals were willing to sacrifice up to one hundred thousand. And that was in the early days. They thought, ok, to stay in power if it’s going to take one hundred thousand, we will kill one hundred thousand. The regime was working on the basis that violence is the way to remain in government, and violence is the way to govern; there isn’t another way. In the early days of the uprising the Syrians who went out protesting, whether they went out in Daraa or they went out in Damascus or went out in
Latakia—not all of the areas were active, but there were many, many areas of Syria that were active in the early days—they didn’t even ask to bring down the regime. They asked for reform. What happened? The regime mobilized huge violence against them, mobilized its military in Daraa, put up checkpoints, cut water, cut electricity, and so on. Today of course we have barrel bombing, we have shelling, and so on. It is not possible to live under a regime that treats its population in those terms. That’s how the Syrians see it and that’s why they’re continuing that revolution, because going back means, really, that they will risk that kind of violence—regime violence—against them. During the uprising there were many, many massacres. Whether immediately, or directly ordered by the regime, or by regime loyalists.

Now, to understand why the regime is reacting in this way rather than accepting opposition and trying to negotiate, I think there is a particular political horizon in which this regime operates. It had from early on created an ‘us’ and ‘them’. An ‘us’ – the loyalists, those who support Assad and the Ba’ath party as formed or as conceived and perpetuated by the regime. So, the loyalists who are really the ‘us’, are the Syrians who are acknowledged and protected. And any dissident belongs then to an ‘other’ to them: a group of enemies from earlier on, from the ‘70s until now. They are the traitors, the conspirators, the plotters, and they deserve to be eliminated. So there is an eradicationist policy that is central to how the regime treats its population. It’s either you are with us or you are against us. So, unless the people are completely loyal and do not question the regime, any questioning, any dissidence merits eradication, merits elimination. Now, of course, eventually people will question. At an earlier period perhaps the dissidents were limited to intellectuals, and there was the Islamist opposition, but eventually, for different kinds of reasons, the anti-regime feeling was growing—for economic reasons.

At one point in the earlier days of the Ba’ath regime there was some semblance of social welfare, whereby there was free education, subsidized education, there was some redistribution of lands and so on, going back to the 1960s, prior to the rise of Assad and in the early ‘70s. But by the ‘90s that had changed significantly, economic liberalization and so on. And much of the country’s wealth was concentrated in a few hands. So actually, ordinary people had very little to gain from the regime or from this government. All their political and social rights are suppressed, but also economically the majority was impoverished, because there was a small group: the regime’s inner circle and its allies, businessmen in the two main cities, in Aleppo and Damascus. And they—some of them coming from Sunni background—were benefitting, but the majority of the population was actually being impoverished and crushed by the regime. So there were also economic variables. We have local grievances, but we also have national and political grievances.

Now the question of sectarianism is central. Is this uprising a sectarian uprising? Is it Sunnis against the Alawites, are Sunnis motivated by a Sunni religious doctrine? If you look at ISIS, you may say yes, that’s the case. But ISIS, again, is predominantly foreign fighters. But the uprising did not start, and is not in its continuity, a Sunni religious uprising against the Alawites. It is an uprising of people who have been excluded from government and disadvantaged and impoverished, against that. For most of these people there isn’t really a religious doctrine. Someone like Razan or like Samar, who is herself from an Alawite background, doesn’t identify with the regime. That part of their identity is not really central. The identity is being a Syrian and a Syrian human being deserves to be treated with respect, dignity, respected and so on. So to think of the uprising as sectarian or that this is motivated by sectarian reasons would be mistaken. However, of course there are sectarian dimensions in the sense that when killings happen and even prior to the killing, the regime used sectarianism in a number of ways. It staffed its security apparatuses and its elite army
divisions with the Alawites. It trapped the Alawite population into the apparatuses of violence. It used the methods of spatial segregation. It created Alawite quarters to house military personnel and to protect it against the population. We see this happening in Damascus and we saw it also happening in Homs and so on. There was a pattern of instrumentalizing sect and sect membership. I think we should think of this as a political sectarianism. It doesn’t actually mean the Alawites benefitted from this regime. The Alawites were hostages of this regime, unfortunately. And they were made to believe that for many of them the survival of the regime is central for their survival. They realize the regime is using them, is exploiting them. But they actually are trapped by virtue of socio-historical reasons, that’s why they ended up in the army and then they ended up being the heavy hand of the regime. Because of that, they have reason to feel that there will be retribution against them. And once that cycle of violence started with massacres and so on, and if massacres can be identified as being committed by one side against the other, of course the struggle will take a sectarian symbolism.

But really the struggle is not over religious issues. It’s about political rights and access to government and representation and about the protection of basic rights for everyone. We can think of parallels. We see cases of similar types of violence in South America. The Syrian case is not exceptional. And it would be reductionist to think that this is something particular to Muslims. When we look at the Columbian case, for instance, particularly in that period that is referred to as “La Violencia” from the 1940s onto the late 1950s, this was a purely political violence, conservatives killing liberals and the other way around. Villagers who were drawn into a massive battle that was very violent for twenty years in which one hundred thousand people perished. I don’t see much difference between the Syrian case and the Columbian case. What we have is really a war between loyalists and anti-regime, primarily. It may take a certain sectarian manifestation, but primarily it’s about supporting the regime and those who are against the regime. And I think we as scholars and analysts may have downplayed also regime support. The regime has some support for certain reasons, protection of the Alawite and some of the minority communities, and also those who economically benefit from the regime, including many, many Sunnis as well.

Now, is the regime changing? Is it making overtures to actually integrate and negotiate? No. The regime is continuing in exactly the same policies it has used for the last forty years. Carrying on with a renewal of the Ba’ath ideology, which doesn’t really have much to it except, again, you are with us, you are a supporter of the Assad regime. Who is the eternal leader? Assad is the eternal leader, whether it is father or son, and it’s created as a kind of a sacralized politics, as if there is a political religion that is so fundamental to the thinking and the political horizon of how this regime is governing. I will stop here and then perhaps in discussion we can talk about how you come out of something like this.
Questions & Answers

Krieger: Thank you. Salwa, thank you very much for your more than important contribution, especially in regards to the issue of sectarianism and violence as a modality of governance. Ladies and gentlemen, it’s time for your questions and comments.

Question: Who is benefiting from the situation in Syria?

Ismail: Well, I think it’s a big question, who profits from the war. I mean there are a number of regional actors. Syria is being used to settle accounts between enemies. Whether it is the Saudis wanting to undermine the role of, and contain the role of Iran in the region—they see the way to undermine Iran in the region as through Syria—or the other way around: Iran seeing that Syria is part of a kind of front of resistance which includes Hezbollah against the West and its regional ally, the Saudis. So there is a regional war, there is a regional conflict that is being fought out in Syria and so the gains by each of these sides, whether it is the gains for Iran and, of course, Hezbollah in the sense that the regime is its main backer, or the other way around: the weakening of the Syrian regime would be a kind of undermining of a foothold that Iran would have in the Arab Middle East. I think the geopolitical interests are very complex. There was an idea from earlier on that the US and the Europeans, but particularly the US, were interested in undermining the regime. I honestly don’t think that’s the case. I don’t think the US was interested in the early days or even perhaps today in the fall of the Assad regime. I think in the first year, weakening the regime would have been a priority if we take into account just the idea that a weakened Assad regime is not a threat, although it was never a threat to Israel, but a weakened Assad regime definitely strengthens Israeli position in the region, because a weakened Assad regime also weakens Hezbollah and the resistance. This is one way of reading it as well. So, were the Americans interested in bringing down the regime or the regime falling? I don’t think so. What did Western powers do as far as cutting the supplies of the regime? We saw oil companies still operating in Syria until the end of 2011. And yes, they talked about boycotts and so on, but they gave them so much time to continue operating. We see them letting foreign investment companies continue to work in Syria until the end of the year. Was that an indication that they wanted to dry the supply sources of the regime? No. There’s no indication of that. A weakened Assad regime perhaps is beneficial, but not a fallen one. And counter forces, like the various Islamist forces and opposition are causing more alarm than the violence that was done by the Assad regime against its population. Not to downplay the viciousness and the violence of the ISIS group or some of these Islamist factions by any means, but actually I think there is a great level of hypocrisy to think that because we are horrified by beheading that when the US sends around drones to kill in Pakistan or in other bits of the world we think it’s a civilized killing and we shouldn’t be outraged about it.
Ghazzawi: I would add to the list of beneficiaries of war that you asked for. Well, you have the warlords now. Those who started as leaders of FSA—who used to be those protectors of the protestors—have become more egoistic and more controlling, more powerful over the years. And they have gained a lot of support from the Arab regimes and the Western regimes. Some of them have been trained by the Western regimes in the Golf States. Some of them have been given money and weapons by the Western regimes. Those have become very powerful and started to attack media activists and activists on the ground. Some of them are Razan and Samira. Those are very much now our future and current enemies. And you have some of the INGOs as well operating inside the country, who claim to want to come and do projects on Syria, who try to do transitional justice and peace building and women empowerment, but who have little effect on the ground, because they don’t know how to work with Syrians. They work in Syria as much as they did in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan. They copy-paste their programs and their project designs onto the ground. Say you have someone working today in an INGO, say one of the biggest INGOs working inside Syria, they would make $6,000, whereas a Syrian working within the project designed by this INGO inside Syria—they would make $200. I mean, this is the kind of salary we’re talking about in the INGO world right now inside Syria. And the person, the Syrian of course, does not have any protection gear or insurance contract whatsoever. Sometimes the money’s even delayed, whereas the international employee would get free housing, a car, and $6,000. I mean these are the beneficiaries maybe from war.

Question: Why did you downplay the destructive role of ISIS as I could understand the question and where did ISIS come from?

Ismail: If that’s the question; I’m not. I’m just trying to say there is a broader population that is fighting a war against a murderous regime, a murderous regime that has been killing its population over a long period of time and stifling its population. So there is a war of liberation on the part of a population. It’s unfortunate that international powers and regional powers conspired against the Syrian people. There is something called Friends of Syria. I would say Syrians do not have friends. Not European and not regional. My position—and that’s something we can talk about—is that I don’t think there is a military solution to this. It has to be a negotiated solution.

I think the question is: this trend of Islamic or Islamist extremism, where did it come from, what does it aim at? And there are many elements to this puzzle. One element in the puzzle is yes, you do have radicalization of Islamist youth from the Arab Middle East, but you also have radicalization of Islamists coming from European countries. Whether they were born and raised in those countries or converts. And you have to ask: what is it that drives them to join a radical Islamist group? And my answer would be: it’s not very different than what drives people to join extremist right wing groups; a sense of disenchantment, exclusion, marginalization, questions of masculinity, all kinds of variables. But we cannot understand Islamist groups in that variety. They’re radical, militant—there are various kinds of groups. So when you have a group like the Muslim Brotherhood, democratically elected in Egypt and then overthrown by a coup, and then that coup is condoned by powers like the Saudis, the
Americans and so on, listed here explicitly, it tells those who sympathize with Islamists that getting their agenda and their views by the ballot and through democratic means is not possible. So there are many, many factors that go into radicalization and the foundation of such Islamist groups. In the case of ISIS, its roots—one of its roots—is in the Iraqi conflict. The invasion of Iraq, the politics of the de-Ba’athization, which we’ve seen aimed at the Sunni population, the continuation of a particular government that was seen as marginalizing Sunnis on the basis that they were supporters of Saddam Hussein and so on. All of these variables were part of the reason why youths joined these radical Islamist groups that would end up forming what is now known as ISIS and then attracting all of these foreign fighters from everywhere.

Question: Do Syrians still believe it is a revolution and it makes sense to go on or is the meaning of the revolution lost?

Ghazzawi: I don’t think it’s important to categorize and kind of discuss the naming of whatever. I think everyone has the right to call it whatever they want to call it. The people inside the country are trying to continue what they believe is a revolution. They have the right to call it that, and I have the right to respect that. But for most of the Syrians who left the country, it’s war. I mean, the thing about Syria is that it’s not—when you talk about the revolution, it’s there. But, for example, when you walk the streets you don’t find the revolution, even in 2011. It’s in tiny streets, the revolution is in tiny streets, it’s in neighborhoods. It exists when it exists. A protest is there and five minutes later it’s not there. Is it a revolution or not? Is it an empty street? I mean, how do I define that? But it changed the whole dynamic of the country. It changed a lot of people. It changed the loyalists. It changed the regime. It changed the region. It changed the world. I mean, this is what the revolution does. So, for right now there are revolutionaries, that’s what I know—if you want you can call it a revolution. But there is a war, and it’s very difficult to operate in war, and there is a civil society. There is a non-violent civil society inside the country up till today. And to call it a civil war, yes, I mean there are areas and there are neighborhoods and there are villages where you have that, but I think it belittles the complexity of the situation to just call it a civil war and compare it to Lebanon, because it’s not Lebanon. It’s not Iraq. So, I don’t like to compare it.

Question: What is the territorial dimension of the conflict?

Ismail: I want to address the question of the territorial dimension in the sense that the Syrian territory is so varied that you have some areas, self-contained neighborhoods, that tend to be one religion or the other. In Homs, for instance, there are some quarters that were predominantly Alawites and there were some quarters that were predominantly Sunni. But they’ve lived next to each other for many, many years. There was tension, because of what I mentioned earlier, because Alawites were identified as the supporters and the beneficiaries of the regime, which wasn’t always the case. And some of them, not all of them, but many were just peasants who continued to be disadvantaged and didn’t really benefit. Many who - and even those who were in the army, the lower level recruits - weren’t
really benefiting; all they managed to do was just get out of their villages and have a low level job. But they became identified with the regime and then there was enmity toward them, because there is enmity towards anyone who is with the regime. Even though they have this kind of spatial distribution whereby you can identify some neighborhoods as predominantly Christian and some neighborhoods as predominantly Sunni, it’s not the primary part of their identity. Now with this conflict it is possible that you will see some fighting between one neighborhood or another, people from one neighborhood and another. You do have lines of conflict and divisions, but, given that this is within neighborhoods and within cities, you can’t separate the way some are thinking that the coast is going to be Alawite and the north is going to be Sunni and the south is going to be Sunni. It’s not going to work that way. The people are very mixed, the idea of separating in the end implies there will be a kind of territorial solution with separation of the population, but there won’t; the population has to live together and they have to find a way of coexisting after this violence, after this killing.

Question: You stated earlier that currently warlords are filling the power gap that is left by the regime, seeing how the story of democratization is going on and on. My question is: Is there still hope for democratization in this region or have we already reached a point at which the people are willing to give up their struggle for peace and security. Which group could bring a positive solution?

Ghazzawi: The question is about who the right guys in Syria are. The question of FSA I think needs to be put in context. There are maybe three kinds of FSA fighters. You have those who defected from the army and don’t want to leave the country. Most of those who defected from the regime’s army left the country and started to continue with their lives. But some of them did not leave the country. They stayed, and their existence has been very influential in the FSA, because they have been trained for the past years. They know how to carry a gun, how to defend on the ground. Those people are really good to have.

The second kind are the protestors who were fed up with peaceful protests and wanted to protect the protests and wanted to protect the neighborhoods. Those are the people who are untrained; they don’t know how to use a gun. They’re very much all over the place, and they are the ones who committed a lot of crimes later on.

And you have the worst kind of FSA: those who only found a place in the revolution through guns. Meaning they are not revolutionaries, they don’t want democracy, they don’t want anything. They just want power. And they got it by having a gun and joining the FSA army and those are the ones who joined Nostra and ISIS, because they are pretty much just going with the flow, with the fashion, with those who are powerful right now, who have money. A lot of the people who joined ISIS are people who want money. Those who supported Islamists are the funders of armies. Those who supported Islamists in Syria, those are the ones who have weapons and those who have money to support FSA. Today, the FSA is left with the good guys and the very bad guys. The good guys are the Hazm and they are based in Idlib. Just yesterday they released a statement signing the human rights international convention. They signed a treaty saying that they will give up their weapons when this war finishes and they would be held accountable for all the crimes that they committed in war. So you have these people and they are all FSA.
Question: Was there a kind of socially marginalized base of the movement in 2011/2012?

Ghazzawi: It’s well-known that the revolution is led by the working class. It’s actually led by people who are in their early 20s, 18 and 19. So they’re pretty young and most of them are working class. People like me, from the middle class, haven’t much joined the revolution, unfortunately. The more privileges that you have, the further away from the revolution you are. The upper class, they’re kind of non-existent—most people who betrayed this revolution are the upper class. A lot of people say that most of the people who support the regime are Alawites and Christians and the minorities. Actually it is the rich Sunnis who love this regime and they want them to stay. There are of course, exceptions. You have a lot of rich men trying to give anonymous support to projects happening right now in the north.

Question: What is the price for Syrians if supported by Saudi Arabia and Qatar?

Ismail: I think on the question of price, it’s very heavy and the Syrians have already paid that price for intervention by all sides. Militarization of the uprising was hijacking really of the revolution. I think of course the regime played a great part in it. We ask, ‘why did people militarize?’ Partly people militarized to defend themselves; at least this is the account that is given from people on the ground and also from the political activists. I remember having a brief discussion with Burhan Ghalioun, who was at one point the president of the Syrian National Council. I asked him ‘why did you support the militarization when in the earlier days of the uprising you were against it?’ And he said, ‘Well when I had villagers from Idlib saying that regime forces or the pro-regime thugs were coming and not only threatening them but raping women and so on, what do we do?’ He said that in time it was not sufficient to say to people, just hide or go away. And he had to accept that they had to arm themselves to protect themselves against the regime’s violence and the security forces. That’s an element of the militarization that Razan touched on and many other factors. But I think that the Saudi, the Qatari influence, and so on has been very negative in the sense that it’s supporting particular Islamist groups. It’s supporting increased violence, I mean the more militarization and the greater use of violence, it’s just basically creating a vicious circle. Of course it’s difficult to say to people who are trying to defend themselves not to defend. And I go back to what you’re saying, so I understand completely Kurds in Kobani defending themselves against ISIS. It’s a normal thing that you would want to do that. So, it’s not a blanket statement. I’m not saying, ‘don’t militarize when you have to engage in self-defense,’ I think it’s something you have to do. But when you actually allow yourself be drawn into a regional and a geopolitical war and become an arm for greater interest, I think this is where the pitfalls are and there has to be self-criticism by Syrians themselves to reflect on what good it does to be allowing themselves to receive support from the Saudis. It’s a big question, it’s a dilemma, and the negative effect of that is already here, we’ve unfortunately seen it.
Question: What would you say about the possible political solution of the conflict?

Ismail: I think it’s like any protracted and long drawn-out conflict. Its solution is going to be over a long period. On one hand, it’s all sides realizing that actually there is no winning in this. Perhaps this is from my own perspective and it may not be that all Syrians would agree with this. I think the departure of Assad is important at the level of symbolism. It doesn’t mean the departure of everybody that was involved in the regime, but I think Assad and the immediate clan or clique is important. But there is going to have to be a long process of negotiation of people. You have eight million displaced. How are these people going to be returned, what reconstruction, truce and reconciliation will there be in the end? There have been many sides involved in violence and atrocities from the regime and the opposition. ‘Truce and reconciliation’ is probably kind of a cliché, but there isn’t some form of transitional justice that will make it possible for people to live with each other again and to coexist. It’s not a kind of blueprint. I think if anyone had the blueprint, we wouldn’t be sitting here. But there are enough Syrians who do not want to see perpetuation of the violence. It is these Syrians who we have to enable and empower through the type of work that Razan and Samira, many other women, and many other still civil non-violent activists are engaging in. It is the people on the ground and the work that has to be done in those spaces where, obviously, there’re spaces of violence, but there are the Syrians in Lebanon and there are the Syrians in Turkey and there are the Syrians in Syria in those places, in Idlib and elsewhere that we need to work with as well.

Question: Razan, a personal question based on the story you told. Will you go back?

Ghazzawi: Yes, my friends and I are debating how to go back and what to do next. Because there’s the question of the veil now; I don’t want to put it on. So we’re thinking about how to get inside without putting the veil on. We’re still in the early stages.

Krieger: Thank you Razan Ghazzawi and Salwa Ismail. I think we had a very fruitful as well as sometimes controversial discussion on the issue of the Syrian war. So thank you very much for joining our discussion. And, I should add, snacks are already prepared in the next room. And you already announced one of the next events organized by the VIDC, so thank you all very much and goodnight.
Speakers

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