
Conference

Syrian Women in Europe Building the Future

Vienna 6th and 7th of October 2022

Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution during the “Arab Uprisings” in 2011, Syrian women have carried a heavy burden. Living with armed conflict, systemic oppression, a global pandemic and a massive economic crisis, many women have become victims of human rights violations and crimes, including crimes of sexual violence.

On its path to liberation from political dictatorship, Syrian society has yet to relinquish its patriarchal structures. Syrian women share their country’s sacrifices, burdens and responsibilities; however, they still struggle to participate in decision-making processes. Gender equality and women's rights, as well as sustainable peace, cannot be ensured without the active and effective participation of Syrian women at all levels.

Since 2015, Syrian civil society in Europe has been strengthening, developing and becoming more organised. It has long been time however to unite these efforts at Syrian female activism in Europe in order to enable Syrian women to effectively participate in building their country’s future.

Several women-led organisations have emerged in Europe, initiated by successful female community leaders. This development offers an important opportunity which can be built upon. At the same time, active Syrian women face many challenges; either patriarchal attitudes, and/or because the dynamics of the Syrian conflict are replicating in their new societies. These factors can lead to disengagement, and/or the isolation of Syrian women from public spaces.

The conference aims to improve communication and networking opportunities for and between Syrian women — both for individuals and entities — as well as to open a space to reflect on the past years of Syrian activism, both in Syria and in Europe. In addition, it will enable participants to

meet and exchange ideas, experiences, and methodologies to help them overcome the barriers and challenges which have emerged in recent years. The broader objective is for participants to establish — if necessary and agreed upon — a cooperative framework to ensure continuity in exchanging ideas and information about projects as well as to discuss the problems and perspectives of Syrian women in Europe. The meaningful participation of Syrian women in their new communities in Europe is essential for the Syrian diaspora as a whole, and for women in particular, in order to be recognised as vital actors in the building of Syria's future.

Background: the conflict in Syria

More than a decade has passed since the revolution began against the Al-Assad regime. Under the control of dictator Bashar Al-Assad, the Syrian authorities have carried out all manner of atrocities to maintain their grip on power, war crimes, oppression of political opponents and crimes against civilians. The number of victims of unlawful killings and detentions, along with forcibly disappeared persons, refugees, internally displaced persons, and people reduced to living in extreme poverty, is horrifying. Although military operations have ceased and the Al-Assad regime has managed to take control of most of the country, the conflict continues. Currently, Syria is divided into several regions, each controlled by different actors. This fragmentation of power makes it difficult to make generalisations about Syria, as the Syrian people face different realities under different power constellations.

Evidence of crimes committed in Syria have been forensically examined by German courts; already two verdicts have been handed down against former Syrian secret service agents for carrying out and aiding crimes against humanity. This is confirmation that the Syrian regime has engaged in torture and sexual violence, in addition to the unlawful murders of members of the political opposition as part of a systematic attack on the civilian population, which also constitutes a crime against humanity.

Despite these circumstances, and along with systemic attempts to marginalise and exclude Syrian women, they continue to play an essential role in resolving the conflict and shaping the country's future. The concerns of Syrian women today are inseparable from the major issues facing Syria.

Registration compulsory: seewald@vidc.org

Conference Language: Arabic/English with simultaneous translation

With funding from

 **Austrian
Development
Cooperation**

Program

06.10.2022 | 19:00 – 21:00

Syrian Women Leading the Change

Venue: Karl-Renner-Institute, Karl-Popper-Straße 8, 1100 Vienna

Welcome: **Magda Seewald**, VIDC

On the role of Syrian women in politics

Sabiha Khalil, founding member of the Syrian Kurdish women's organisation, Komela Jin, and member of the Syrian Women's Network, Syria/Germany

Syrian women in civil society

Ruham Hawash, co-founder and deputy director of IMPACT - Civil Society Research and Development, Syria/Germany

Syrian women in research and knowledge production

Oula Ramadan, founder and director of Badael, Syria/Germany

Activism of Syrian women in Northern Syria

Nivin Alhotary, women's rights activist, Syria

Chair: **Jelnar Ahmad**, Research and M&E manager at IMPACT - Civil Society Research and Development

To be followed by a networking reception with drinks and snacks

07.10.2022 | 09:00 – 17:00

Networking Conference: Syrian Women in Europe Building the Future

Venue: Diplomatic Academy, Favoritenstraße 15a, 1040 Vienna

Welcome: **Samar Al Bradan**, Syrian Women for Justice and Peace/VIDC

09:15 – 11:00 | Presentations

Legal reality of Syrian women in North Syria

Elham Said, Syrian lawyer and activist speaking from Syria

The future of truth and justice in the eyes of Syrian women

Amneh Khouliani, peace activist from Daraya, director of Families for Freedom

Psychological trauma and its effect on the activism of Syrian women

NN, Association Afya/Syrian Women for Justice and Peace

A critical review of the constitutional process and women's participation

Sabah Hallaq, women's rights activist, CEDAW expert specialising in women's and citizens' rights

Chair: Abir Haj Ibrahim, peace-building facilitator, co-founder of Mobaderon Network and a board member of Globally Connected

11:00 – 11:30 | Coffee Break

11:30 – 13:00 | Parallel Working groups

The role of Syrian women in the future of Syria (Arabic/English)

When thinking about the future of Syria, it is important to consider the role of women. Given the unique suffering of women in war and conflict, it is crucial to examine the particular role Syrian women should play in leading change and transforming the conflict. The discussion in this group will explore common understandings and highlight differences in how Syrian women see their roles in this process.

The main challenges facing Syrian activists in civil society and politics (Arabic)

A safe place to critically consider and analyse recent developments as well as past years of activism for Syria in Europe, while also addressing pervasive and recurrent challenges and unresolved issues, with a focus on solutions and best practices. This group aims to enable the sharing and development of ideas on how to tackle these challenges.

13:30 – 14:00 | Lunch Break

14:30 – 15:30 | Parallel Working groups

Syrian women in the academia / Syrian knowledge production from a female perspective (Arabic / English)

Research and knowledge production are essential for building Syria's future. Syrian women in the diaspora are contributing to building Syria's future through their work as researchers and scientists. A discussion on the importance of research and knowledge production carried out by Syrian women in the diaspora. How can women unite their efforts to make the most of European access to higher education?

Political participation of Syrian women (Arabic)

Syrian women continue to be excluded from effective participation in political processes affecting Syria's future and the peace process, whether in Geneva, Sochi, Astana or elsewhere. There is no doubt that effective political participation in Syria is impossible, however participation rates in opposition bodies and organisations is also unimpressive. Although many voices criticise and question the legitimacy, relevance and effectiveness of these internationally-funded procedures, it is vital to discuss and learn from the representation mechanisms and means of women's empowerment used. This group will focus on personal experiences and views of the systemic challenges faced by Syrian women in the political arena and how young women can be empowered to participate more broadly in politics.

15:30 – 16:00 | Coffee Break

16:30 – 17:00 | Conclusion and the way forward

Speakers

Jelnar Ahmad currently holds the position of Research and Monitoring & Evaluation Manager at IMPACT - Civil Society Research and Development. Her experience includes the management and coordination of research projects such as the *Mapping of Syrian Civil Society Actors*, *Gender Dynamics within Syrian Civil Society*, and *Root Causes of Violent Extremism in Northeast Syria*, among others.

Samar Al Bradan is a law student at the University of Vienna. Her studies and work focus on international criminal law and the application of universal jurisdiction in the Syrian context (CEHRI). In parallel to her legal career, Samar is a founding member of Syrian Women for Justice and Peace. She also works as a consultant for VIDC on matters concerning the Syrian diaspora in Austria and Europe.

Sabah Alhallak is a women's rights activist and CEDAW expert specialising in women's and citizens' rights. She is a board member of the Syrian Women League, as well as a member of the Women's Advisory Board for the UN Special Envoy to Syria, the Mini Constitutional Committee and the NAFS Steering Committee. Ms Alhallak is also a member of the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy and recently participated in a UN General Assembly event on Syria.

Nivin Alhotary (via Zoom from Syria) is a women's rights activist from Eastern Ghouta, in the suburbs of Damascus, and was forcibly displaced to the countryside north of Aleppo. She studied and practiced business management before becoming chair of the board of the Women Empowerment and Support Unit.

Abir Haj Ibrahim is one of the two co-founders of Mobaderon Network and a board member of Globally Connected. Since 2011, Haj Ibrahim has worked as a peacebuilding facilitator, focused on building bridges and conflict resolution in response to local needs in Syria. Haj Ibrahim also contributed to T2 dialogue platforms such as the Syrian Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) in Geneva for the Syrian peace talks. At the end of 2014, she, along with the other co-founder of Mobaderon Network, received the Livia Foundation Prize for their work on peace during the conflict.

Ruham Hawash is co-founder and deputy director of IMPACT - Civil Society Research & Development. Hawash studied economics and holds a MA in Peace and Security. She participated in the peaceful uprising in Syria and since 2011 has been active in civil society and grassroots non-violent movements. Hawash is now based in Germany and has participated in multiple conventions on Syria as a public speaker. She is also a board member of the Verband Deutsch-Syrischer Hilfsvereine (VDSH).

Sabiha Khalil is a feminist advocate and political activist. She is a founding member of the first Syrian Kurdish non-partisan women's organisation, Komela Jin, and the Syrian Women's Network. She is also a founding member of the Syrian Women's Political Movement, a member of its General Secretariat, and the chairperson of its organisational committee.

Amneh Khoulani has been active in Syrian civil society for decades and is co-founder and general coordinator of the Families for Freedom movement. Before the revolution, she contributed to the foundation of the Darayya Youth Group 2003 for Peaceful Change, all of whose members were arrested by the regime in 2003. After the revolution, she was again arrested with her family, as a result of their peaceful activities. She and her husband survived detention, but her three brothers remain missing following their enforced disappearances by the Syrian regime. She has participated in Security Council sessions on detainees in Syria and received the International Women of Courage award from the US Department of State in 2020.

Oula Ramadan is the founder and director of Badael and has 14 years of experience in human rights, peacebuilding, as well as in sexual and gender-based violence. Before founding Badael she worked in Syria for the UNHCR, responding to and preventing sexual and gender-based violence in refugee communities from the MENA region. She co-authored several research papers with a focus on civil society, peace, and women's activism.

Elham Said (via Zoom from Syria) is a distinguished Syrian lawyer who was nominated for membership of the Union of Free Syrian Lawyers in 2020. Her duties include chairing the Women Lawyers Committee, representing Syrian female lawyers on international legal platforms and with legal partners, facilitating and addressing obstacles hindering the practice of the legal profession, coordinating legal workshops, and providing legal advice.

Magda Seewald is a political scientist and division director of VIDC's Global Dialogue department. Her focus is on the Arab region. As a gender advisor, she works on the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.