

# perspectives

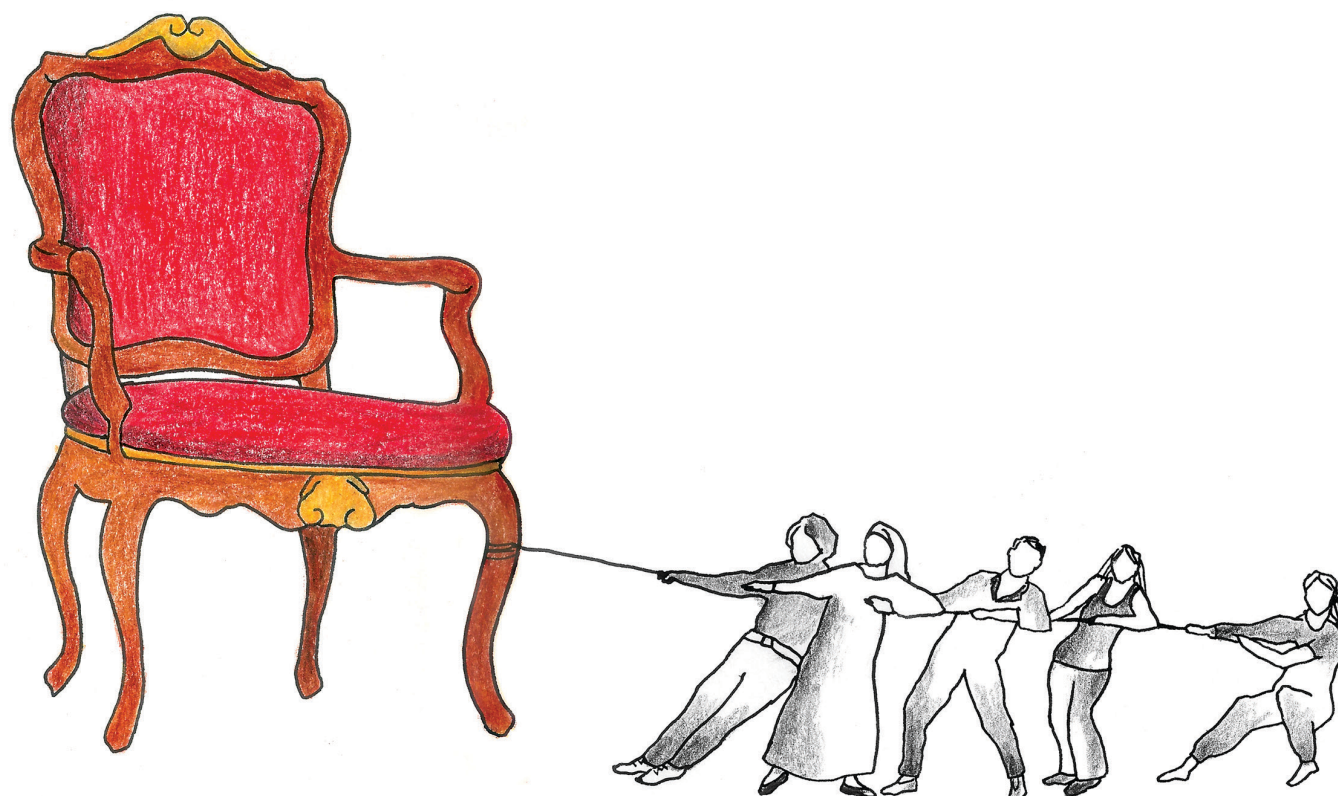
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POLITICAL ANALYSES AND COMMENTARY

## Middle East & North Africa

'Khadija, do not close the door!'

Women in Peace, in War and In Between



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# Editorial

When women in the Middle East make the headlines, it is usually as victims. Disturbing stories of the so called 'Islamic State' (ISIS) kidnapping and raping tens of thousands of women are sadly often the ones which stick in the Western memory. But there is more to women's political lives in the region than their victimisation and oppression. We decided to look to the future, present and past in this issue, in order to present an alternative narrative which challenges these representations of women.

This issue opens with Robert Bain's work, in which we are taken back to ancient Assyria. He discusses parallels between Assyrian rule and ISIS – two cultures feasting on violence and terror, and whose treatment of women has been similarly troubling.

It is often assumed in the West that political Islam might be the biggest hindrances for women's rights in the region. However, developments in Egypt, ranked as the worst country for women's rights in the Arab world in 2013, show that women's rights have even deteriorated under the current – secular – leadership. Equally, Lebanon's multi-confessional democracy and Syria's allegedly secular authoritarianism are examples where we see that the assumption about women's rights depending on the worldview and ideology of a political system is not so straightforward.

Liberal Lebanon's parliament is, with only 3 per cent female representatives, hardly more gender-balanced than those of the more conservative Gulf States. When the Ta'if agreement for Lebanon was negotiated, its 'fathers' (!) introduced quotas for the representation of the 18 different sects in the country – but not for the slightly more than 50 per cent of the population who are women. Walid Hussein from the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections discusses the potential benefits of establishing a female quota in the electoral system. With regard to Syria, political analyst Wael Sawah analyzes the meagre mentioning of women's rights in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's programme over the past decades. The Syrian journalist Yahya Alous takes a critical look at how the Ba'ath Party in Syria has attempted to deal with the issue of women's rights – more for the outer appearance than actually advancing women's rights.

Women's political participation and representation is the topic of further articles, including a piece by Hoda El Khatib Chalak advocating for the vital role of women in policy-making in the Middle East. The activist Leen Hashem studies the role of women in the recent anti- government protests in Lebanon from a feminist

perspective. These women feature in the iconic photographs by Marwan Tahtah, Hussein Baydoun and Ibrahim Dirani across the issue.

The marginalisation of women in politics is not down to their reticence to speak out, but even for very vocal women it is not easy to be taken seriously. Syrian activist and blogger Marcell Shehwaro furiously shares her experiences on how people treat women based on clichés, and the absurdities women must contend with in order to garner respect and legitimacy in a men's world.

Taking a broader look at developments for women in the region, Palestinian sociologist Dr. Honaida Ghanim provocatively asks whether Arab feminism came to an end with the collapse of the Arab spring. The ongoing war in Syria is a source of great struggle for many thousands of women. This issue explores what it means to be on different ends of a conflict in three articles featuring Syrian women in exile, in both regime-controlled and opposition areas. Syrian activist Majd Chourbaji talks about the double burden for female Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Lubna Alkanawati, a Syrian activist who has long been living under siege, explains the special situation and needs of women in besieged areas. Alisha Molter interviews a young woman from Damascus, who speaks out about changing attitudes and life in a capital that is slowly becoming devoid of men.

Given that peace talks worldwide tend to remain in the hands of men – even though the negotiations' results affect the lives of both men and women. Thus, bringing women to the negotiating table is an absolutely necessary demand. Yet it matters how they get there; Rami Araban discusses why in his article on the 'Women Advisory Board' in Syria's Geneva talks. Finally, Lebanese illustrator Jana Traboulsi movingly depicts women in the region with her pencil and colours.

For the title, we decided to use a line from a poem by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. In 'Poem Of The Land' he calls upon Khadija, the most famous female figure in Arab and Muslim history, 'not to close the door'. We found it inspiring to think of women's power to decide access to their lives; how much they disclose, or whether they will allow only a glimpse through the door gap.

Time to turn the page, and enjoy reading.

Bente Scheller, Dorothea Rischewski, Bettina Marx and Joachim Paul

# Women, Fundamentalism and Terror: Echoes of Ancient Assyria

Robert Bain

When so-called 'Islamic State' (ISIS) fighters were reported to have blasted and bulldozed the ancient Assyrian site of Nimrud into the ground last year, the rest of the world lined up to condemn its actions. One ISIS militant, engaged in the destruction of Assyrian antiquities in the Mosul museum, told the camera 'we were ordered by our prophet to take down idols and destroy them.'<sup>1</sup>

The stated intolerance of ISIS to pre-Islamic cultures like the Assyrians has not prevented it from exploiting the trade in smuggled Assyrian antiquities as a source of revenue. However, this is not the greatest irony in this sad state of affairs. Of all of the empires that have flourished in the Middle East throughout human history, ISIS has perhaps most in common with the ancient Assyrians.

Their commonalities include the brutal treatment of women; the use of terror for political ends; and religious fanaticism. In this article I explore the connections which can be made between these phenomena in the context of ancient Assyria, and argue that the similarities and linkages between the conditions of existence of the ancient Assyrians and ISIS is not as tenuous as might initially appear.

## The Status of Women in Ancient Assyria

Evidence of how women in the ancient Middle East lived is patchy. There was simply no reason to record details of the lives of ordinary women - or ordinary men, for that matter, but we know more about the lives of men simply because more men held positions of power. Our main evidence on the status of women in ancient Assyria comes from administrative documents and law codes, and paints a picture of women as subordinated to men in all areas of life. From

the evidence we have, we can say that the role of women in ancient Assyria, which made up much of what is now northern Iraq, does not appear to have been significantly different from women in Babylonia (in southern Iraq) or in other neighbouring regions. However, their treatment by the law and at the hands of their menfolk appears to have been significantly more brutal.

The best source on the status of Assyrian women is a law code that dates from the reign of the great King Tiglathpileser I (1115 - 1077 BC) of the Middle Assyrian period. It is concerned exclusively with women, and paints a grim picture of their situation.<sup>2</sup> Because of the incomplete state of the evidence, it is difficult to say exactly how much harsher the law was on women in comparison to men, but the provisions of the law code regarding women show clearly that this was the case. Women could be punished not only for their individual transgressions, but also for crimes committed by their relatives under the principle of *ius talionis* (an eye for an eye).

'If a man forcibly seizes and rapes a maiden who is residing in her father's house... the father of the maiden shall take the wife of the rapist of the maiden and give her over to be raped; he shall not return her to her husband, he shall take her (for himself).'<sup>3</sup>

The victim of the rape would be married to her rapist.

Punishments prescribed for various other offences a woman might commit included cutting off her ear and/or nose, and possibly by, though damage to the text means we cannot be sure, gouging out her eyes or tearing off her nipples.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of better information, we cannot determine whether men would be subject to similar punishments and for what crimes. However, the code itself makes it clear

that a wife's physical wellbeing depended on the whim of her husband. It stipulates: 'In addition to the punishments for a man's wife [outlined above]... a man may whip his wife, pluck out her hair, mutilate her ears, or strike her; it bears no penalty.'<sup>5</sup>

The law in ancient Assyria did not systematically deprive women of all their rights, but they were still effectively second class citizens. As in many strongly patriarchal societies, a woman's perceived value lay mostly in her supposed role as an incubator of male seed.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, her sexuality was tightly controlled by her family; her purity and faithfulness a matter of family honour. In this, ancient Assyria had much in common with other kingdoms of the time. However, as shown by these examples, it stands out for the brutality with which these conditions were enforced.

## The Lives of Wealthy Assyrian Women

Evidence on the lives of actual women who lived in ancient Assyria is drawn from ancient documents; accounts which for the most part are not representative of all levels of society. The majority of women who appear in ancient Assyrian texts are associated with the Royal Palace. During the Neo-Assyrian period (883 - 608 BC), royal women certainly lived very different lives than most. There is evidence that they were independently wealthy, they could buy land, and we also know many sent and received letters.

The queen was an important figure in the Neo-Assyrian period, but her importance derived primarily from her status as mother of a future king. We know the name of ten queens from the Neo-Assyrian period, but only have substantial information about three, one

of which was Sammu-Ramat. Sammu-Ramat is known to posterity by the Greek version of her name, Semiramis. She was the queen of Shamshi-Adad V (824 - 811 BC) and was, unusually, highly influential for the first five years of her young son Adad-Nirari III's reign between 811 - 783 BC. Her position was such an exception to the usual role of women of the time that she became a fantastical, almost mythological figure in the stories told by the later Greeks and Armenians.

Other women also appear in the palace archives. Female officials appear to have had important roles running the households of royal ladies, and possibly others too.<sup>7</sup> Though there is no conclusive evidence that women in Assyrian royal palaces were secluded, female officials may have been employed to protect the purity of royal women; a later age would use eunuchs (castrated males).

Outside of palaces, we hear mostly of women being associated with temples. That women played important roles in worship is clear. The texts attest to the existence of many prophetesses, who proclaimed the words of the gods at various important cultic centres throughout the empire. Women also worked as priestesses. Despite popular belief, there is little actual evidence for the existence of temple prostitutes in ancient Mesopotamia. This appears to have been an invention of a much later Greek author who used the idea of sacred prostitution to illustrate the moral decline of Babylon.<sup>8</sup>

A few other women do appear in the texts as unconnected with palace or temple. The texts refer to them as *harimtu*, which was long translated as prostitute, but now appears more likely to mean a single woman with an independent social existence, tied neither to a husband, father or institution. Most *harimtu*



Robert Bain lived in the Middle East for ten years and has worked in the field of journalism and human rights in relation to the Middle East. He holds postgraduate degrees in the Modern Middle East and Ancient Near Eastern History.



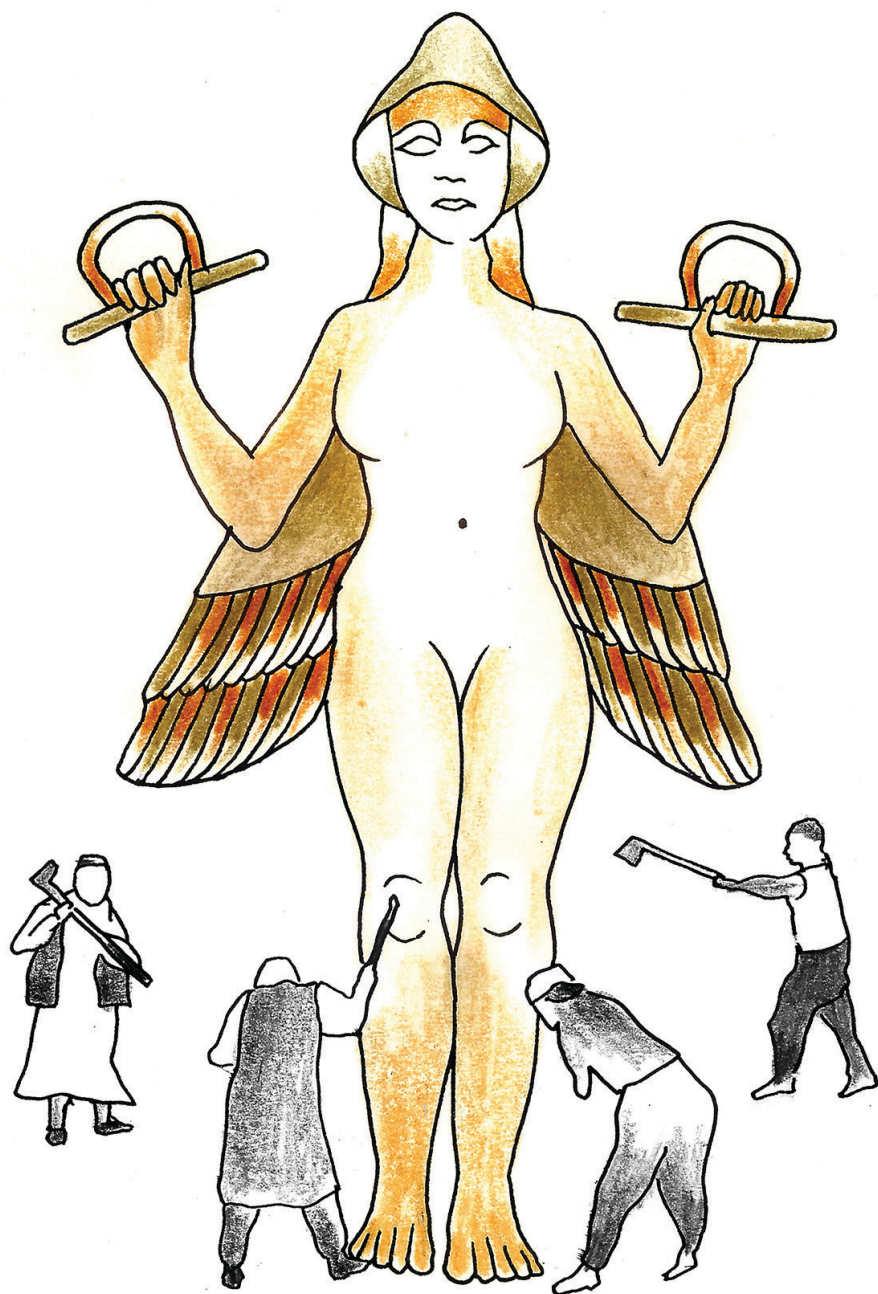
seem to have been poor, although there were some notable exceptions. The term has negative connotations in several texts, where it is used as an insult. This likely indicates the vulnerability of women in ancient Assyrian society without the protection of family or the shelter provided by an institution; but it means that an independent existence for women, however precarious, was possible.<sup>9</sup>

The picture that emerges of the status of women in ancient Assyria is for the most part of dependence, their social existence largely subordinated to that of the men in their lives. This was common throughout ancient Mesopotamia, indeed throughout the ancient world. As noted above Assyria was only exceptional in the brutality with which this

social order was enforced which, I argue, may be explainable in terms of Assyria's unique political culture.

### Terror as a Weapon of War

When Byron wrote 'The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold' in his famous poem *The Destruction of Sennacherib* in 1815, he accurately summarized what the world knew about the ancient Assyrian empire at the time, derived from the strongly negative portrait of Assyria in the Bible. Archaeological excavations that began soon after in Iraq and the deciphering of the Assyrian script later that century have added a great deal of detail to that picture, but left it largely unchanged: the



Ancient Assyrians gloried in their own brutality. Look closely at the walls of the Neo-Assyrian reliefs in various museums around the world and you will likely see direct evidence of that. These reliefs tell variations of the same story: the mighty Assyrian king at the head of his army is victorious. Those who resist are dealt with brutally. Many are killed in battle, trampled underfoot and riddled with arrows, city walls are demolished by Assyrian siegecraft. Those taken alive have their heads cut off, or are flayed alive. Assyrian scribes then record booty – precious items, statues of the gods, metalwork, animals, and entire populations – to be carried off to Assyria while soldiers relax nearby by playing catch with severed heads.

One of the first kings to use terror as a weapon of Assyrian statecraft was the Middle Assyrian king Tiglathpileser I, who reigned between 1114 - 1076 BC, under whose aegis the law code on women was issued; he seems to have consciously cultivated fear in both his subjects and his enemies.

But later kings of the Neo-Assyrian period took this to a completely different level. The annals of Assur-Nasir-Pal II (883 - 859 BC), generally recognised as the founder of the Neo-Assyrian empire, boast of the atrocities he committed against prisoners: 'Of some I cut off their feet and hands; of others I cut off the ears noses and lips; of the young men's ears I made a heap; of the old men's heads I made a minaret. I exposed their heads as a trophy in front of their city.'<sup>10</sup> Another of his texts recounts flaying the skin off the notables of a rebellious city and using it to cover the city walls.<sup>11</sup> The reliefs of Assurbanipal (668 - 627 BC) depict a defeated Arab king with a dog chain inserted through his jaw being forced to live in a kennel.<sup>12</sup>

This was not wanton brutality; it was psychological warfare, calculated to inspire terror. This terror had real military and political value. Fear of the consequences of opposing the military might of Assyria made it less likely that might would have to be used. Vassals would think twice about rebellion, and enemies would lose their nerve and surrender early in the hope that they would be treated more leniently. The annals of the Assyrian King Sargon II (722 - 705 BC) record that during a massive campaign against his northern neighbour, the kingdom of Urartu, the local population was too terrified to attempt resistance and many Urartian garrisons simply abandoned their posts at the approach of the Assyrian army.<sup>13</sup>

### Religion in Service of the State

The Assyrians themselves justified this violence with what can be described as a political theology. Mesopotamian religion was polytheistic; they believed there existed many gods, with various attributes and abilities, all far beyond the human. Many cities or kingdoms had special associations with particular gods, hosting important cult centres dedicated to the service of the god in question. For example, although many gods were worshipped in Babylon, this city's patron deity was Marduk, and Babylon was seen to serve him above all other gods.

Assur (pronounced and occasionally written 'Ashur') was Assyria's patron deity. Assur was also the name of Assyria's first capital, and forms the root of the modern names for Assyria and Syria via ancient Greek.<sup>14</sup> The Assyrians came to assert that their god Assur was chief of all the gods. Therefore, as all other gods were subject to him, so too should all other people who served these other gods be subject to the chief servant of the god Assur on earth: the king of Assyria: on earth as it is in heaven.

The Assyrians even wrote themselves into the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma Elish* (named after its opening words 'When on high') to cement the religious justification for their political dominance. They rewrote the epic, in which Babylon's patron god Marduk assumed the role of chief of the gods, to feature Anshar, a primordial god in the Babylonian pantheon they equated with Assur.<sup>15</sup>

The Assyrians cast their dominion in explicitly religious terms. Unlike the empires of the last few centuries, the Assyrians did not view themselves, their subjects and their enemies in racial terms. Their enemies were not as lesser human beings, they were simply ungodly. If the conditions of their social existence were radically different from the Assyrians they must also therefore be uncivilised and barbaric. The Assyrians even explained the terror their army inspired in religious terms. The annals of Assur-Nasir-Pal II recorded that 'awe of the radiance of Assur, my lord, overwhelmed [the city of Suru].'<sup>16</sup>

### The Army and the Empire

Given the enthusiasm of the Assyrian state for warfare, it is perhaps not surprising that the army was its major institution and its key state building instrument. Located in the fertile plains of northern Iraq on the middle reaches of the Tigris river, Assyria could support a large



population and formed a single, relatively coherent and easily-controlled geographical unit. It was surrounded by strong kingdoms, the other major kingdoms of the second and early first millenniums BC - Egypt, Mitanni, the Hittites, Urartu, Babylon, Elam and later, the Medes. This meant that in times of weakness it would be vulnerable, given that it was surrounded on all sides. However, in times of strength it was also therefore in a prime position to dominate the region.

Assyria won its independence from its northern neighbour Mitanni late in the second millennium by force of arms, and eventually indeed annexed most of the Mitanni kingdom, defending itself from Hittites and Babylonians in the process. The army was the bulwark that managed to protect the heartlands of the Assyrian kingdom from the regional conflagrations which resulted in the collapse of most of the kingdoms of the Late Bronze Age in the late second millennium BC. Military campaigns under a succession of kings culminated in the reigns of Assur-Nasir-Pal II and his son Shalmaneser III, when Assyria became the preeminent power in the region.

However, a rebellion at the end of Shalmaneser III's reign and a protracted civil war resulted in a century of relative decline under weak kings. Then in 745 BC, the governor of Nimrud seized the throne in a bloody coup, massacring the royal family. He assumed the throne name Tiglathpileser III, reigning between 745 - 727 BC, and became one of the greatest conquerors in world history. Within his lifetime, his armies conquered most of the world known to the ancient Mesopotamians. His successors expanded the empire he had established, even adding Egypt to the vast imperial domain of Assyria.

The key to Tiglathpileser's success lay in his reforms to the Assyrian state and army: he centralised power and professionalised the army, in the process creating what has been described as the first truly imperial structure in history. Previous empires had relied on small corps of professional soldiers and large seasonal levies of troops, and had conducted campaigns to loot and pillage, cowering their enemies into submission. By comparison, the bureaucratic and military structures Tiglathpileser III established were clinical in their efficiency – and systematic in their brutality. A dedicated corps of administrators supervised the confiscation of surplus from conquered peoples to support a full-time army of military professionals, drawn from the Assyrian population and subject peoples.

The scale of Assyrian imperialism also

increased in the late Neo-Assyrian period. Policies which Assyrian kings had deployed since the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, like the mass deportation of peoples to pacify conquered territories and increase the population of the empire's heartland, were massively expanded. In 701 BC, after his third campaign to quell rebellions on the Mediterranean coast, King Sennacherib (705 - 681 BC) claims to have deported a staggering 208,000 people, which must have been a significant proportion of the region's population at the time.<sup>17</sup>

Yet despite this formidable imperial edifice, it was difficult for the Assyrians to maintain control over their vast empire. Revolts were common, especially on the imperial periphery, and the empire was frequently racked by civil wars fought over the accession to the throne. The end, when it came, was swift. A civil war over the throne soon after the death of the empire's last great king Assurbanipal was followed by protracted unrest and rebellions that critically weakened the empire. The Assyrian King Sin-Shar-Ishkun (627 - 612 BC) was unable to decisively stamp out a revolt in Babylonia led by Nabopolassar because of constant revolts in the Assyrian heartland.

By 616 BC Nabopolassar had succeeded in wresting control of most of Babylonia from the Assyrians. Nabopolassar then entered into an alliance with Cyaxares, king of the Medes, another former Assyrian vassal. At this point, the end was nigh for the Assyrian empire. By 612 BC, all of the cities of the Assyrian heartland had been captured and sacked. The last Neo-Assyrian king, Assur-Uballit II, managed to hang on in the west for a few more years before the Assyrian empire became a footnote in history.

Though the Assyrians themselves have survived until the present as a distinct community in Iraq, they were relegated to bit players in the service of other empires in the grand sweep of history. Assyrian troops served in the Persian army which the Athenians defeated at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC. The Roman Empire recruited Assyrian legions. In more recent times, Assyrians served in the Iraq levies, the local troops that the British used to control Iraq after they took control of the country after the First World War. And of course the Assyrians, who converted to Christianity early under the Roman Empire, have suffered at the hands of ISIS.

## Militarism, Fundamentalism, Terrorism and Women

This brings us back to the question of relationship between religious fanaticism,

the use of terror for political ends and the brutal treatment of women. The common denominator between the Assyrian empire and ISIS is surely that they were both born of violence in a violent and unstable political milieu, in which military success was and is an essential condition of survival.

In such conditions of existential crisis, all resources are directed toward the immediate goal of domination to ensure survival. The ideological justification for this existential struggle becomes almost eschatological in its tone, invoking a Manichaean struggle between good and evil.

In the context of such a political project people don't have rights, they have uses. This particularly affects women because in patriarchal societies, women are disempowered or at least in positions of structural weakness, and thus are more vulnerable to exploitation – both individually and as a group asserting their rights.

This is surely where the underlying similarities between the Neo-Assyrian empire and ISIS lie: they are both militaristic political projects served by extreme religious-political ideologies that use terror as a force multiplier in order to further their political goals. It is no surprise that the burden of harm in these political projects have fallen most heavily on women, the members of their societies that in a strongly patriarchal society are structurally in the weakest positions.

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- 4 Damage to the text makes this difficult to ascertain
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# The 'Female Quota' in Lebanon: A Temporary Solution to a Chronic Political Problem

Walid Hussein



Walid Hussein is a Lebanese writer who contributes to various Lebanese and Arabic newspapers. He is the coordinator of the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform in Lebanon. He specialised in Governmental and Political Sciences at the University of Trieste, Italy.

Women have long been subjected to political and social marginalization in the Land of the Cedars. Ever since 1952, the year in which women obtained the right to vote in Lebanon, the proportion of women occupying parliamentary seats has remained exceptionally low.<sup>1</sup> Despite frequent assertions by Lebanon's male politicians that women constitute half of society and therefore are entitled to have a say in the way the country is run, at present their political representation falls far below acceptable limits.

To spare ourselves a trip into the past let us look at the current parliament where we find that women occupy less than four per cent of the total number of seats; four out of 128.<sup>2</sup> In the 2005 parliament, women held six seats out of the same total number.<sup>3</sup> While there has been a decline in female representation from 2005 to 2009 in the national parliament, female representation in local assemblies rose noticeably after the 2010 local government elections, with an almost 100 per cent increase on figures from the 2004 elections. Nevertheless, the increase was still below desirable levels, with only 526 women winning places on local assemblies out of a national total of 11,424 seats which were up for contestation (i.e. less than five per cent).<sup>4</sup>

As for female representation in government itself, since 2004 – the first year a woman served in any Lebanese government – there has never been more than one or two women holding a position. Similar levels of representation are seen in the senior elected bodies of Lebanese political parties.<sup>5</sup> Far from granting women additional responsibility, men continue to dominate decision-making processes within the apparatus of state. This is a reflection not only of a male-dominated society, but of the lack of laws which protect women's status and

ensure they stand on an equal footing with other members of society. Lebanon's failure to abide by international treaties and agreements that deal with gender discrimination is a further problem, particularly when it comes to ratifying the principle of a 'female quota' for women's representation in decision-making positions, which would certainly contribute to boosting their political participation and reduce marginalization.

## Types of Quota

The quota system is based on the idea of granting minorities – be these religious, ethnic, or linguistic – seats in centres of governance. It is thus different to systems that use 'proportionality' in apportioning seats to these minorities, as it operates independently of the electoral process. Multicultural states use such systems to secure both political stability and fair representation for all society's constituent communities within the institutions of state. It also ensures that minorities are involved in public policy making, particularly on policies which will affect them. Furthermore, they make the political system more democratic by reflecting the principles of consensus and participation, as opposed to the binary of majority/minority.

The female quota system differs both in principle and in terms of its application from the minority quota system however. Its international support is based on a principle of equal representation for the two sexes, not to mention the fact that women in no way constitute a minority within society. Historically in Lebanon there has been absolutely no representation for women in decision-making positions, fair or not; and in the majority of countries throughout the world, women's

representation remains largely inadequate. The female quota system therefore involves setting aside seats for women in centres of governance. It is thus a 'positive measure' designed to enable women to occupy decision-making positions in the state.

- A quota system can promote women's representation via three basic mechanisms:
- The first is the reservation in advance of seats for women. The constitution stipulates that a given number of seats are to be set aside for women in the legislative, local, and executive assemblies, and that this happens independently of the electoral system. In keeping with the constitution's articles, women thus obtain their own specially reserved seats in the legislative and local assemblies. However, the implementation of this type of system can be argued to run counter to the principle of 'free competition' between candidates of both sexes.
- The second, then, is the reservation of seats on lists. This model is based on the freedom of political blocs and parties to nominate female candidates on their lists. This has the effect however of making women dependent on the readiness of any given party or bloc to accept women onto their lists in the first place. Furthermore, this model offers women a generally low chance of winning electoral seats; not only for the reasons mentioned above, but because their success also relies on the order their names appear in the list, and their own individual political strength.

- The third option is the reservation of seats on lists in a way which is actually legislated. This model is similar to the previous one but with one essential difference: the political parties and blocs are legally obliged to nominate a given number of women on their lists. Usually speaking, electoral law stipulates a minimum and/or maximum number of female candidates per list. There are many positives to this model - not least that it does not directly impinge of the principle of free competition between candidates of both sexes, and women are not reliant for representation on individual parties' idiosyncratic attitudes towards women candidates. Furthermore, the fact that seats on the lists are reserved by law considerably increases women's chances of winning.

That being said, there are problems with this approach. Raising the odds of female candidates winning seats requires a number of measures to be put in place, especially determining the position and order of female candidates on party lists. Currently, the preferred method of ensuring female candidates win seats is to order the names consecutively; in the case of a 30 per cent quota, for example, a woman would be placed on the list after every two men. Last but not least, the 'minimum quota' is the system that allows women to win more than the legally determined minimum number of seats, while the 'maximum quota' system does not, as it sets from the beginning the maximum of seats women can be attributed.



Meeting in Down Town, Beirut  
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## The Legal Framework

Thirty-seven years have passed since the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) by the United Nations, and some 17 years have passed since Lebanon signed up to the convention in 1997. Its implementation under Lebanese law has not been without pitfalls; Lebanon entertained some reservations about certain articles, specifically 9 and 16, which deal with personal status law. Despite this, successive Lebanese governments have failed to take a single step forward to implement a female quota and thereby enable women to reach decision-making positions.

Article 4 of CEDAW states, 'Adoption by States Parties of temporary special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women shall not be considered discrimination...' while Article 7 requires that,

*'States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right: a. To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies; b. To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government; c. To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.'*<sup>5</sup>

This was followed by General Recommendation No. 5, 1988, by the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which sought to clarify the meaning of 'temporary special measures', calling on States Parties to take special measures such as 'preferential treatment or quota systems' to advance women's integration into political life.<sup>7</sup>

The Fourth World Conference on Women that was held in Beijing in 1995 further developed the concept of 'temporary special measures' and called in its Platform for Action for 'the equal mobilization of men and women on the level of decision- and policy-making ... and setting aside quotas to ensure a minimum female representation of 30 per cent.'<sup>8</sup> The Beijing Report effected positive change in a number of countries which went on to adopt genuine measures to set aside positions for women within the institutions of state.<sup>9</sup> However, gender equality globally has still fallen short of parity between men and women.

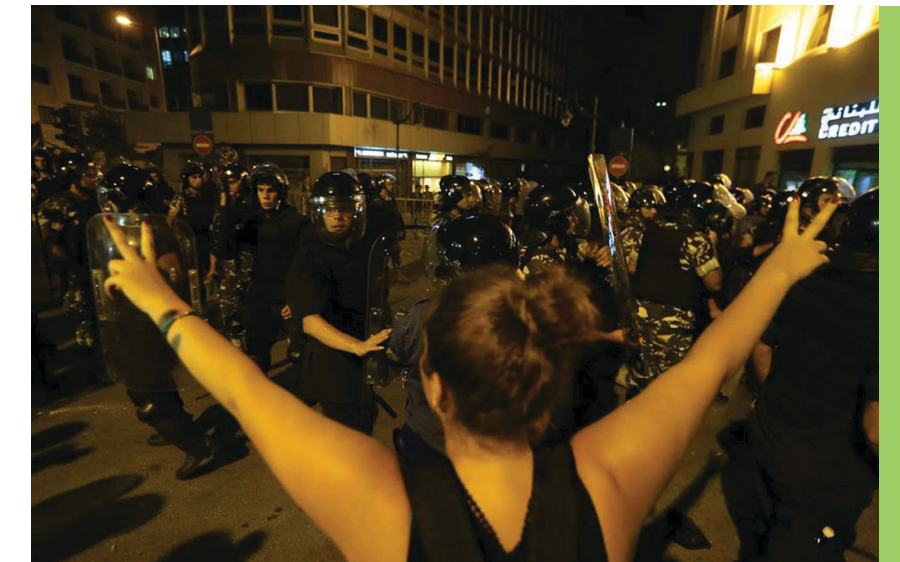
In Lebanon, international conventions and treaties have produced nothing but promises deferred, awaiting the outcome of an endless debate between political forces for and against the principle of creating quotas for women in institutions of governance. Even as academic studies indicate that female representation below 30 per cent means women cannot form a decisive or influential decision-making bloc and that just representation means equal representation, Lebanon still acts as though women's political rights do not exist.

Whilst the text of the draft law that the government placed before parliament in 2010 stipulated that 20 per cent of seats in municipal assemblies should be reserved for women, the draft electoral law that the government subsequently forwarded to parliament in 2012 backtracked and treated women's right to representation in such a way as to deny it any influence on the decision-making process.<sup>10</sup> Article 52, for instance, stipulated only that 'Every party list must include at least one candidate from each gender.' In contrast, the draft law drawn up by Marwan Charbel for the 2013 parliamentary elections contains a quota for a minimum of 30 per cent representation by either gender.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, none of these draft laws have seen the light to date. The branch committee of parliament's Administration and Justice Committee, which is responsible for looking into electoral reform, has become paralysed. In this way it is no different to the legislative assembly itself, which has been dissolved for more than a year and a half.

## Currently Proposed Laws

Perhaps the most notable and longest-standing proposals are those which seek to grant Lebanese women genuinely meaningful political rights. A number of suggestions have been made by the National Commission for Electoral Law, which was founded in 2005 and subsequently known as the Boutros Commission as it was chaired by the late minister, Fouad Boutros. The Commission has advocated that creating a women's quota on 'electoral lists' was preferable to one based on reserving parliamentary seats for them in advance of the elections so that, 'the electoral system is not burdened with new reserved quotas in addition to those already set aside for sects and regions.' Article 64 of the draft electoral law that the Commission presented to the cabinet in 2006 stipulated that 'all lists drawn up in districts that follow the proportional representation system must include no less than 30 per cent women.'<sup>12</sup>



*A woman facing the Lebanese authorities during the 2016 protest movement against the garbage crisis in Lebanon*  
©Hussein Baydoun

The commission's suggestions caused a radical change in the structure of electoral reforms in Lebanon, not least in the move it makes towards expanding women's access to influential positions in government. But for all that the commission's proposals stemmed from the urgent need for reform – long called for by Lebanese society, alongside the need for Lebanon to abide by international human rights treaties and agreements to which it is signatory – through the 30 per cent target, the commission also set a ceiling on such reform. This has become difficult to shift. Many proposals put forward since, including former minister Ziyad Baroud's draft law for municipal elections in 2010, contain the same 30 per cent minimum quota for either sex as recommended by the Boutros Commission.

The draft electoral law proposed by the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform (CCER) in 2011 altered the calculus for the female quota, with Article 2 of this proposed law stating 'the list must contain a proportion of no less than 33.33 per cent women.' It also contained the innovative suggestion that 'lists must ensure that in the order of candidates there is a minimum of one woman for every three men.' These proposals show that the CCER was extremely keen to ensure that female candidates would have every chance of success, first by including a section on the ordering of female names on party lists, and secondly by insisting on the principle of a 'minimum quota'. To safeguard the principle of free competition between candidates of both genders, the same article also stipulated that the quota system described be implemented 'for only four electoral cycles' on the grounds that 'the female quota is a "temporary positive measure" designed to enable and effect political participation among women.'

## Comparisons with Other Arab States

Unlike Lebanon, the majority of Arab states have already implemented the female quota system. They have pursued this either by reserving seats on legislative and local assemblies or by ensuring that electoral laws contain articles requiring party lists to include a specified proportion of women candidates. For example, Jordan has a quota system based on allocating parliamentary seats to women in advance, with Article 8 of its 2012 electoral law reserving 15 seats for women to which other seats linked to the division of electoral districts may be added.

Iraq has a system based on a minimum quota on party lists, with Article 13 of its 2013 electoral law stipulating that 'the proportion of female candidates on any list may be no less than 25 per cent, while the proportion of female representation in parliament must also be 25 per cent or above'. It also requires that 'when lists are drawn up and candidates placed in order there must be at least one woman every three men.'<sup>13</sup> The Iraqi legislature thus shows itself to be keen on not only political representation for women but also to preserve an absolute minimum of 25 per cent female representation.

A quick comparison of these two countries with Lebanon thus gives us a sense of the indifference of the Lebanese political class to women's issues and the right of women to participate in the decision-making process.

## Conclusion

Lebanese women continue to be marginalised by the authorities. They are denied their role in the decision-making process and the political rights guaranteed for them in



various international treaties. Whilst Lebanese politicians sing the virtues of the democracy and freedoms which supposedly set it apart from other countries in the Arab world, they still take a back seat when it comes to recognising political rights for women by adopting 'positive measures' which would empower women in the institutions of governance.

Globally, women may be in a better position politically than they were a century ago, but women's political representation in Lebanon has actually witnessed a decline since the last parliamentary elections in 2009. While it is certainly the case that political representation of women has increased in local elections, both in terms of the numbers of female candidates and the number of women winning seats in assemblies, this improvement has not been the result of positive measures taken by the Lebanese authorities. Indeed, this has happened despite the fact that the authorities have managed to completely ignore the international treaties to which they are a signatory.

The current electoral law which dates from 2008 makes no reference to the principle of a gender quota, and the 2012 law that the government forwarded to parliament was a scandalous instance of the ruling political powers' complete indifference to women's issues and the importance of them being represented politically. The only paragraph that references gender quotas in the 2012 law describes it as a matter of 'raising the threshold'. The stipulation that lists must contain at least one candidate of each gender cannot be seen as a positive measure in any sense of the term. Not only because it does not set out any specific, clearly defined percentage, but the text's very unambiguity ensures that the issue remains shrouded in uncertainty. It also fails to include any requirement for the lists to order their candidates in such a way as to ensure female candidates have a chance to win.

Last but not least, it is worth reiterating that it is not enough to issue laws forcing lists to incorporate a fixed gender quota, however generous such a quote might be. At the minimum, lists must also place candidates in a gender-sensitive order, to ensure that female candidates are able to win. In addition, the law must contain articles which make it incumbent on political parties and blocs to ensure clearly defined proportions of female representation in legislative and local assemblies.

The question remains: with the promulgation of the new and long-awaited electoral law, will Lebanon see a leap forward on women's representation? With political parties currently working towards consensus over the fine details, we shall not have to wait long for an answer.

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

- 1 For more information see statutes No.6 (4/11/1952) and No.7 (12/11/1952) amending the electoral law that was promulgated on August 10, 1950 at the following link:  
<https://www.lp.gov.lb/viewpublications.aspx?id=7>.
- 2 <https://www.lp.gov.lb/HouseDetails.aspx?id=1>.
- 3 <https://www.lp.gov.lb/HouseDetails.aspx?id=2>.
- 4 <http://www.nclw.org.lb/Statistic>
- 5 See the study by the Lebanese Women's Democratic Gathering entitled Organizational requirements to strengthen women's participation in political parties and syndicates in Lebanon at the following link:  
<http://www.rdfwomens.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/final-book.pdf>.
- 6 <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/0360793A.pdf>.
- 7 <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm#top>.
- 8 <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20A.pdf>.
- 9 <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/session/presskit/fs7.htm>.
- 10 <http://www.moim.gov.lb/DetailsElections.aspx?idn=36>.
- 11 [http://www.elections-lebanon.org/docs\\_2\\_1\\_1.aspx?lg=ar](http://www.elections-lebanon.org/docs_2_1_1.aspx?lg=ar).
- 12 [http://www.elections-lebanon.org/docs\\_2\\_1\\_1.aspx?lg=ar](http://www.elections-lebanon.org/docs_2_1_1.aspx?lg=ar).
- 13 <http://www.parliament.iq/details.aspx?LawIDF=575>.

## The Muslim Brotherhood's Take on Women's Rights: Reading between the Lines?

Wael Sawah

As a religion, Islam is often accused of discriminatory practices towards women. Whether this is true or not cannot be easily determined. On the one hand, there are indeed many verses in Qur'an which assert that women are not equal to men in their human and social status<sup>1</sup>, or in matters of inheritance<sup>2</sup>, court testimony<sup>3</sup>, polygamy, and personal cleanliness<sup>4</sup>. According to Qur'an, on many matters women are not permitted to have a voice – this is particularly the case in sexual relationships.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, there are other verses in Qur'an which suggest the opposite is true.<sup>6</sup> These verses advocate for equality and harmony between men and women in an Islamic society.

Regardless of this debate over what the Qur'an states about the role of women, what is clear to see is that most Islamists have taken positions that degrade their status and situation. Historically, even Islamist groups involved in struggles for social justice have not made serious efforts to challenge the widely held image of Islam as oppressing and marginalising women. The Muslim Brotherhood of Syria is no exception to the failure of such popular movements to address the issue of gender equality in a meaningful way. In their programme in 1949, they limited their vision for women to one sentence, which simply read, 'raising the woman's level and protecting her ethics and value; and paying attention to her uprising so as to be a good mother and a good raiser'.<sup>7</sup> Sixty years later, things have not changed much.

### Raise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria

The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria has a history of fighting against the secular, pan-Arab, socialist Ba'ath Party of the Syrian middle

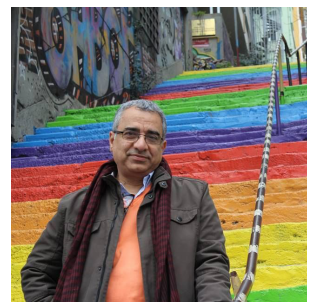
classes. Established in the 1940s, the Muslim Brotherhood gained power in 1961 but was driven underground three years later after a coup by the Ba'athists in 1963. Over the next 20 years, several violent armed conflicts took place in the city of Hama and Homs. This led to the destruction of Hama during a terrible battle in which most of the Muslim Brotherhood were killed, and many others went into exile.

### The Muslim Brothers Return

The death of the late President Hafez al-Assad in June 2000 and the assumption of power by his son Bashar opened the door to the Damascus Spring<sup>8</sup>. The Damascus Spring included almost the entire political and civil society opposition spectrum except for the Muslim Brotherhood, whose 'inclination' was to give the new regime in Syria a chance to carry out reforms, or at least to show that it had the desire to do so. The Muslim Brotherhood even expressed their readiness to 'cooperate with the regime to achieve this and were ready to accept gradual reform'.<sup>9</sup>

By this point, it must be noted that many aspects of Syrian society had already been 'Islamized'. The previously secular Ministry of Culture was given to a pro-Islamist minister. Islamic institutions mushroomed, with clerics becoming more important than professors, artists, and writers. The famous Sufi women's movement *Qubaysiyat*, which works within the circles of women in the upper middle class and upper class, moved away from meeting in secrecy and into public life. *Qubaysiyat* was established by Munira al-Qubaysi under the auspices of the regime, and comprises more than 75,000 women, making it a significant and influential Islamist group.

Although they did not participate in the



Wael Sawah is Executive Director of The Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression and Editor-in-Chief of The Syrian Observer. His research interests include civil society in Syria, and he is author of a number of research papers and books in both Arabic and English. Wael is a member of the *Annual Middle East Legal Studies Seminar* at Yale University, a board member for the *Day After Association*, a founding member of the *Arab Rationalists League*, based in Paris, and Editor of the website *Al-Awan*.

new regime, the Muslim Brotherhood gradually returned to the political scene. They worked on developing their political visions for a future Syria, resulting in three major documents over the subsequent years: 'The National Honour Pact' (May 2001), 'The Political Project for the Future Syria' (2004), and 'The Pledge and Charter by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood' (2012).

### 'The National Honour Pact'

In 2001, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood published a document which became a landmark in the post Hafez al-Assad political era: 'The National Honour Pact'. The document is a set of ideas that the Muslim Brotherhood proposes for dialogue among the Syrian political parties to reach a national pact of honour, as it is no longer viable for any party to claim that it alone represents the nation.<sup>10</sup>

The document was a real change in the Muslim Brotherhood's approach. It envisages the establishment of a 'modern contractual state' based on institutions and the separation of authorities. However, the Pact fails to account for social progress, especially on the question of gender. It mentions women in only one instance, when it states that its signatories abide by 'cooperating to defend human rights and the rights of individual citizens, ... and protect women and defend their rights and ensure the equality between women and men regarding their human and civil eligibility.'

This vague statement does little to advance the cause of gender justice. It subsumes women's rights under the issue of human rights regardless of their particular concerns, and fails to address 'empowerment'. Whilst the document stresses that equality between men and women is in their human and civil eligibility, it does not acknowledge the need for equality in men and women's social and political status. This supports rather than challenges the assertion that the Islamic vision prevents women from playing a leading role in the state or society. While they are humanly equal, they are not socially equal.

### 'The Political Project for the Future Syria'

As a second step in the Muslim Brothers' new trend the party published its 'Political Project for Future Syria'.<sup>11</sup> The project, which drew a lot of discussion and opposing positions, did not deny any of the promises made in 'The National Honour Pact'. However it was more conservative, being based on Islamic rules and verses of the

Qur'an. It states that Islam is enshrined as 'a code of conduct for the devout Muslim' and should be a 'civilisational identity' for all Syrians, as the official religion of the country and the highest source of legal authority.

The document did take a step forward in clarifying the way the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria saw women. A whole chapter was dedicated to women, describing them as 'the core of humanity and the source of creation ... equal in dignity, humanity and responsibility.' It states that 'women are the equal halves of men and the main principle in Islamic teachings is the equality between both apart from a very few exceptions stated clearly by Allah Almighty, for objective reasons and factors.'

There are however a number of issues with the way women are presented in the document. Not least, women's role is described in emotive terms which do little to advocate for women's emancipation.

*'The relationship between man and woman is a complementary rather than a competitive one, and the rights of women are ordained by Allah Almighty, and not granted by or forced out from men. We do not see that a woman's devotion to caring for her home and her children as either belittling to her or a sacrifice on the part of society, but rather as a form of specialization and distributing efforts. However, this concept by no means prevents women from participating in public life, particularly those whose personal conditions and situations allow them to enter the employment market, so that ultimately women in our society are callers to Islam, workers in all fields of life, artists, jurists, scholars, voters and candidates to public posts.'*

Additionally, the Muslim Brotherhood would not pledge to make efforts to help women overcome the 'personal conditions and situations' it refers to in order to enable them to play a bigger role in society. Rather, it suggested it would allow 'those whose personal conditions and situations allow them to enter the employment market' to do so. This is clearly problematic.

However, the document did frame the issue of women as important for society as a whole. Thus, promoting women and their cause leads inevitably to the promotion of humanity and justice. It recognised that women have rights to education, employment, elections to parliamentary and political offices, as well as social rights such as the right of choosing a spouse without any compulsion and to custody of her children, in accordance to the Islamic law. The 2004 political program therefore represented – at least in theory – a tremendous step forward in political Islam's way of looking

at women.

### 'The Pledge and Charter'

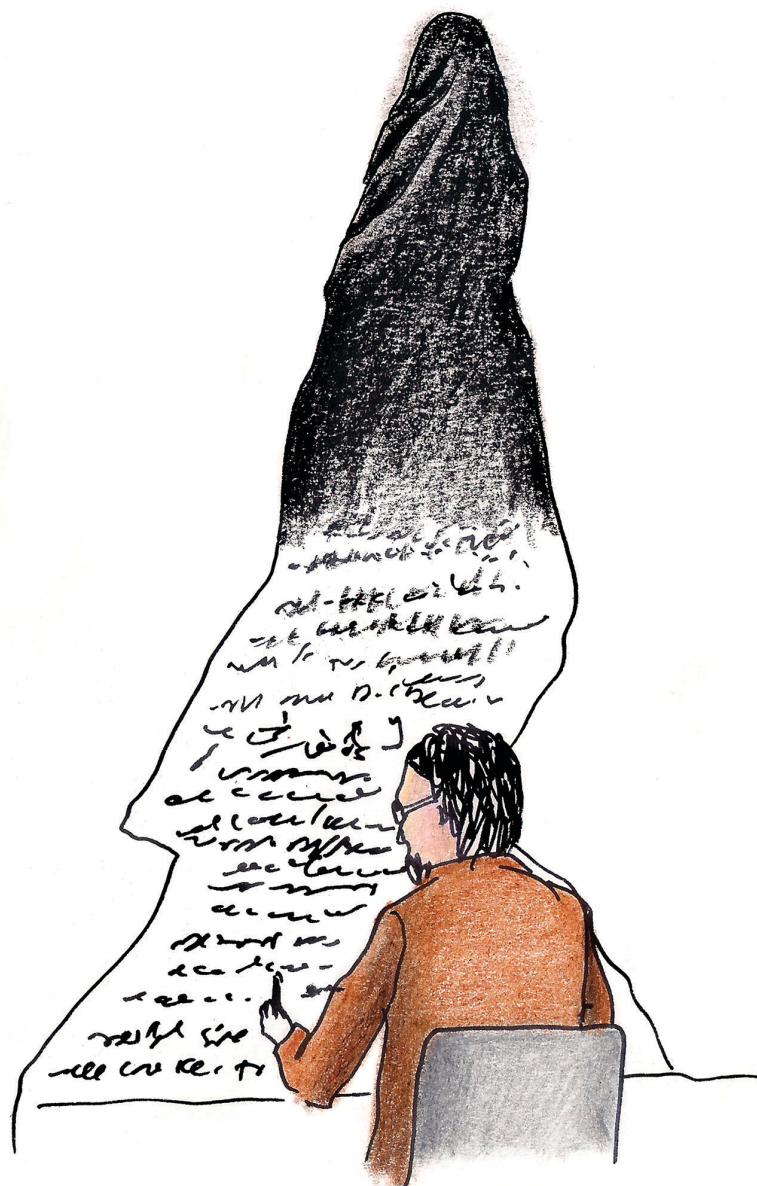
The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood occupied a significant place in the Syrian revolution. Until August 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood's role did not exceed that of any other political group; indeed, the entire political establishment played little part in the wave of protests which swept the nation. After August 2011 however, weight started to shift away from demonstrators and their political expressions and back to the political parties (and to some extent to the fighting militias). This shift gave the Muslim Brotherhood a strong role because it is more organised than other parties, is wealthier, and has better connections with regional centres of power.

To enhance this position, the Muslim Brotherhood played all their pragmatic cards, and announced that they would work for

*'a civil state that is sovereign and in which the individual enjoys all the fundamental rights guaranteed in international laws and conventions of human rights, without any discrimination on the basis of religion, sect, ethnicity or social background. We seek to build a state founded on a civil constitution with separation of powers, and where all citizens, men and women, will participate in its governance through the ballot box in a free and fair manner that allows the election of the most capable to every office.'*<sup>12</sup>

To overcome suspicions about its intentions as an Islamist group, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood published a new document titled 'A Pledge and Charter by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood'. This detailed the movement's views regarding the form that a post-Assad Syria should take. In this document, the movement clarified its commitment to strive for a modern civil state with a civil constitution and a parliamentary republican regime, chosen in free elections. This would be a state that would practice civil, religious, denominational, and gender equality and in which every citizen has the right to reach the highest positions. It advocated for governance based on dialogue, partnership, commitment to human rights, and combating terrorism, enabling Syria to become a source of regional stability.

The new document was more concise than its 2004 political program, and even the 2001 'National Honour Pact'. But despite its liberal language, the issue of women rights was still not discussed in detail. The document overtly states that the Muslim Brotherhood would work for a Syria that is based on citizenship and equality, in which 'men and women are equal in human





dignity and legal capacity, and the woman enjoys her full rights.<sup>13</sup> However, the document fails to specify what these rights might be. It iterates the equality of men and women, but as in previous document, avoids mentioning women's political rights. The document states that 'all citizens should be equal regardless of their ethnicity, faith, school of thought, or orientation';<sup>14</sup> again, no mentioning of gender.

## Putting Principles into Practice

The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria are pragmatic, and due to this they appear flexible in their stance on issues related to gender. However, despite their liberal discourse, there is always a gap between what they propose in theory and are willing to practice. In an interview with Dubai TV, the Muslim Brotherhood's current leader Riad al-Shakfeh said that his group favours a civil state that does not state the religion – or gender – of their officials. 'If the Syrian people choose a Christian or a woman to the office of President, we will support their decision' he said.<sup>15</sup> In this he is echoing the former quasi-liberal group leader Ali Sadruddin al-Bayanouni.<sup>16</sup> Still, the Muslim Brotherhood have very few women in the leadership in Syria; two in the Executive Office and six in the Shura (legislative) Office.

Neither were the Muslim Brotherhood tolerant of women occupying high ranking offices in the alliances they were part of. Basma Kodmani, a woman who played a vital role in establishing the Syrian National Council (SNC), failed to get enough votes to remain in the SNC Executive Bureau allegedly because the Muslim Brotherhood would not support her. She was blunt when she accused 'members of the organisation of focusing on their own partisan and personal agendas to the detriment of the organisation as a whole.'<sup>17</sup>

In addition, it must not be overlooked that the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria are part of the Muslim Brother's International Organisation, which oversees several Muslim Brotherhood groups in the region.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, no matter how pragmatic and flexible they can be in their discourse in Syria, the group are unlikely to be able to break the circle of influence of the Muslim Brotherhood groups in Egypt or the Hamas Movement in Palestine. In this regard, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood may struggle to distance itself from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's claim that the UN declaration calling for an end to violence against women will lead to the 'complete disintegration of society'.

The experiences of women in Gaza under Hamas is not any more encouraging. According to a report released by Freedom House in 2012, under Hamas the 'personal status' law has been derived almost entirely from *Sharia* (Islamic law). They argue that this puts women at a stark disadvantage in matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and domestic abuse. Rape, domestic abuse, and 'honour killings', in which relatives murder women for perceived sexual or moral transgressions, are common and often go unpunished by the Hamas leadership, which is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood International Organisation.

## Syrian Sisters: A Challenge for Muslim Brothers

A major factor forcing the Muslim Brotherhood to dedicate thought to women's issues is so-called 'Islamic Feminism'. This movement aims for the full equality of all Muslims, male and female, in both public and private life. It became popular in the 1990s, and wholly rejects the notion of a public/private dichotomy in which different rules apply to different sexes. Instead, 'Islamic Feminism' conceptualises a holistic *umma* in which Qur'anic ideals are operative across all spaces.<sup>19</sup>

The Muslim Brotherhood cannot accuse Islamic feminists of demeaning the religion or buying into Western ideas. Leading Islamic feminists such as Ziba Mir-Hosseini have argued that indeed 'Islamic Feminism' has been developed in reaction

*'to dominant Western feminist trends, according to which to be a feminist you have to be secular and must work within a secular framework, an understanding that is something heavily influenced by white, middle-class Western women's experiences and cannot be said to be universal at all!'*<sup>20</sup>

Islamic Feminism is therefore a serious challenge to the Muslim brothers. In Syria, Islamic Feminism has been represented by the *Qubaysiyat* mentioned earlier in this piece, but also by other strong and popular figures. These include Asma Keftaro, the founder and director of the Islamic Syrian Women Forum; Sahar Abu Harb, the founder and director of the gathering Non-Violence Planet; and Hanan Laham, the renowned, influential preacher.

Last but not least, there is a demand for a more inclusive approach from within the Muslim Brotherhood's own ranks. In the early 1950s a young female activist, Amina Sheikha, met Mustapha al-Sibai, the Syrian group's founder and exceptionally charismatic leader. She told him she wanted to set up a Syrian Sisterhood

which could be tasked with recruiting female members. In 2016, the Sisterhood has become even bigger in number and greater influence, both within the organisation and in its national role.<sup>21</sup> Most recently, six women were elected to the group's *Majlis al-Shura* (consultative body) and two of them now form part of the organisation's leadership. This number is set to rapidly grow according to a source close to the leaders.<sup>22</sup>

The prominence of the Syrian Sisterhood is also growing within the Muslim Brotherhood's 'youth branch' where girls and young women reportedly make up about 10 per cent of the membership. When a three-day meeting of the youth branch was organised in Istanbul in December 2012, these young female Islamist activists emerged as the voice of innovation. At the current time they will not be a threat to the Muslim Brotherhood's historic leadership, because due to their age they cannot have direct influence; however, their spirit and enthusiasm will definitely create a challenge to the masculine leadership of future Islamist politics.

In conclusion, the Muslim Brotherhood has wide paces parting from their old discourse, at the theoretical level; there is still work to do in persuading them of the need for further practical shifts. To understand where this work lies, the Muslim Brotherhood needs to listen to the new generation within the organisation and across the nation of Syria. As one prominent journalist put it,

*'the fact that women were among the first to demonstrate against the regime is little reported. But despite that, women remain grossly under represented when it comes to the local opposition councils inside Syria and the opposition bodies that exist outside of the country.'*<sup>23</sup>

This is not happening yet – but this has little to do with their Islamist foundations, given that secular parties are not much better in this regard.

- 1 'And the men are a degree above them [women]' Qur'an: 2:228.
- 2 'If there are both brothers and sisters, the male will have the share of two females. Allah makes clear to you [His law], lest you go astray.' Qur'an: 4: 176.
- 3 'And bring to witness two witnesses from among your men. And if there are not two men [available], then a man and two women from those whom you accept as witnesses - so that if one of

- the women errs, then the other can remind her.' Qur'an: 2: 282.
- 4 'Or (if) you have had contact with women, and ye find not water, then go to clean, high ground and rub your faces and your hands with some of it.' Qur'an: 5:6.
- 5 'Your wives are as a tilth unto you; so approach your tilth when or how ye will...' Qur'an: 2:223.
- 6 'Particularly, 'Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so - for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.' Qur'an: 33:35.
- 7 The platform of the Socialist Islamic Front, the political umbrella of the Muslim brothers, published in al-Manar al-Jadid Newspaper, 11/11/1949.
- 8 A term that was given to the period that lasted for one year and witnessed extensive civil society activities, which the regime ended by force, jailing several leaders of the movement including the liberal activist Riad Seif.
- 9 MB Leader Ali al-Bayanouni to al-Jazeera's Ahmad Mansour, August 19, 2005.
- 10 Mashroua Mithaq Sharaf Watani lil Amal al-Siyassi, (A Draft national Pact of Honor) available in Arabic at: <http://www.levantnews.com/archives/3197>.
- 11 An English translation of the program is available at: <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=5804>.
- 12 See former MB leader Ali Sadruddin al-Bayanouni: The Muslim Brotherhood wants a future for all Syrians, The Guardian, 6 August 2012.
- 13 An English translation of the Pledge and Charter can be found at: <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48390>.
- 14 An English translation of the Pledge and Charter can be found at: <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48390>.
- 15 The interview is available in Arabic at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MuhlL6wc3wU>.
- 16 See: <http://www.thisisysria.net/2007/10/29/syri-atoday/02.html>.
- 17 SHANE FARRELL, Has the SNC lost its voice, available at: [https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reports/features/has\\_the\\_snc\\_lost\\_its\\_voice](https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reports/features/has_the_snc_lost_its_voice).
- 18 For detailed information about the MB International Organization, see Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Leader Provides Details On "International Organization", available at: <http://globalmbreport.com/?p=1451>.
- 19 See Rachelle Fawcett, The reality and future of Islamic feminism, al-Jazeera net, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/03/201332715585855781.html>.
- 20 Interview With Ziba Mir-Hosseini, available at: <http://www.countercurrents.org/sikand070210.html>.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Arwa Damon, Syria's women: Fighting a war on two fronts: <http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/07/world/meast/syrian-revolution-women>.



# Skin-Deep Only: Troubling Hypocrisies in the Ba'ath Party's Approach to Women's Rights and Secularism in Syria

Yahya Alous

The Ba'ath regime in Syria has never truly resolved the national debate over how to maintain the secular nature of the state. Constant assertions of its secularism in official and media discourses are at odds with the actions of the state and the manner in which the country is run. The Ba'ath Party itself, which has ruled the country for the past half century, pretends to be proud of its secular constitution; however, the party has never managed to persuade anyone that it is a genuinely secular organisation. In the 1980s, while militiamen loyal to the current president's uncle, Rifaat al-Assad, were ripping the hijab from the heads of women in the capital, Syrian television continued to broadcast the Friday prayers every week. In the 1990s, even as thousands of Islamists crowded into the regime's prisons, the number of mosques was on the rise. State security-run al-Assad Institutes for Qur'an Memorization were opening their doors to new students – a large proportion of which are now in 2016 fighting with Islamist groups against the regime in Damascus.

media or politics. Until 2011, the country had never had a single veiled minister, ambassador, or even television presenter, though this was no accurate reflection of the true state of affairs: the country's ministries have historically thronged with women in hijabs. In other words, the state's secularism was no more than a mask.

Since its establishment in 1963 the Ba'athist regime has never changed a single article of any of the long-standing personal affairs laws – Islamic, Christian or otherwise – in order to emancipate women from religious edicts governing areas such as marriage, divorce and inheritance, guardianship and trusteeship. Nor have there been any changes to other laws connected with women's rights, such as the penal code law and the nationality law. The only amendments the 'secular state' has made were the most minor alterations. These have been strategic moves, designed to give the impression that it wanted to grant women more rights but was constantly thwarted by the religiously reactionary attitudes of the various sects which were trying to keep women's rights and affairs under their control. Given that the state has deliberately confined religious figures from all sects to a particular role in public life, it is telling of their attitude towards gender equality that perhaps the only area in which they continue to be permitted to raise objections and have influence is on the issue of women's rights.

On August 8, 2009, the national leadership of the Ba'ath Party issued a general statement in which it clarified the party's position on one of the worst and most regressive religious groups of all: the followers of Sheikh Abdel Hadi al-Bani. Some of the more notable beliefs of this sheikh's group are that it does not believe in women's liberation, it rejects mixing of the sexes, opposes women working outside the

home, and forbids television. The group seeks to establish an Islamic (not Arab) state, meaning that its objectives are totally at odds with any secular, or even semi-secular, constitution. The statement says that the Ba'ath Party has nothing negative to say about the group, so long as it confines itself to the sphere of religious creed.

The Ba'ath Party then dispatched a functionary to make the rounds of state newspapers in order to explain the party's position, but none of the journalists challenged him with a single question over the compatibility of this position with their secularist stance. Of course, if this statement had come from any genuinely secular organization it would have occasioned a major scandal, but it is commonly recognised that Syrian secularism is simply a cover – a propaganda tool for the regime.

The relationship of the regime with the Qubeisiyat is another instance of its apparent comfort in allying itself with the most repressive religious movements. Whilst the Qubeisiyat operates with the consent of the regime and the security services, it is perceived by secularists to be one of the most dangerous religious groups. It targets upper-class women and converts them into devoted followers of the group's leader, Sheikha Munira al-Qubeisi. It also runs a number of kindergartens that provide an Islamic education for children. It also propagandizes constantly on behalf of President Assad, just as it did with his father before him. Indeed, the Qubeisiyat are perhaps the most pro-regime Islamic group in the country, continuing to pursue their religious activities just hundreds of meters away from the 'secular' Ba'ath Party headquarters.

## 50 Years of Paralysis

Given this state of affairs, it is perhaps unsurprising that in five decades of Ba'ath rule there has been a complete paralysis on the issue of women's rights. A governmental organization called the General Women's Union was set up and run by the Ba'ath Party, but this is the only organization allowed to work on women's issues. It has undertaken work on illiteracy, early childhood education, and natal health, but women's rights have never been among its priorities.

Over this period, public life in Syria was incapable of generating a genuine civil society or a serious human rights movement, due to the repressive presence of the state and its monopolization of all public activism. The state has imposed conditions on all areas of life. It has refused to license any human rights organizations, instead setting up front organizations that were totally controlled by the state itself, and leaving women's rights at the mercy of religious authorities.

The state did begin to appoint female ministers, members of parliament, and diplomats, adhering to strict proportional quotas that were rarely, if ever, exceeded. Indeed, there have been two female ministers who would resurface in cabinet after cabinet holding different, but consistently non-vital, portfolios. No woman has ever assumed control of a strategically important ministry. Similarly, the proportion of women members of parliament held steady at 30 out of 250 MPs (or 12 per cent). With one exception, no woman was ever elected to parliament as an independent candidate. All MPs were elected on Ba'ath Party lists, with a few seats left for independent (male) candidates. The same applied to female diplomats. The quota in this field was not



Yahya Alous is a Syrian journalist living in Berlin. He was the editor in chief for al-Thara, a leading women's rights e-magazine in Syria. He spent two years in prison for writing articles on corruption and human rights which criticised the regime. Between 2011 and 2015 he worked for al-Hayat and is now a columnist for *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Handelsblatt*.

## Women's Rights? Not a Public Affair

An area in which it is particularly challenging to argue for the state's secularism is in its governance of women's lives. Various purely religious edicts, including the eight personal affairs laws based on various religions and sects, have been used to exercise control over women's affairs. The face that the Syrian regime has always showed to the world has long been very different to how it has looked from within, and its attitude to gender is no different. Indeed, to support the secular image it claimed for itself, the regime did its best to ban veiled women from occupying any visible position in the

arrived at by considerations of competency, or out of a desire to promote women's rights: the only factor taken into account for them as well as for their male counterparts was loyalty.

## Symbolism, not Substance

Back in the 1990s, before she was due to take over the Ministry of Higher Education, Dr. Salha Sonqur wore the hijab. As soon as she received the letter appointing her as a minister in the Ba'ath Party's government, she received unmistakable hints from the security services that her hijab was not invited to accompany her to her new offices. So the hijab stayed behind: but what she did bring with her were her religious beliefs and conservative worldview. This then was Ba'athist secularism: a superficial phenomenon.

The long-standing Minister for Culture, Najah al-Attar, is another example of this phenomenon. She headed the Ministry of Culture for decades, but not because she was uniquely talented. Rather, she was sister of one of the regime's mortal enemies: the former Supreme Guide of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Issam al-Attar. When the regime sent its Secret Service to assassinate Issam al-Attar in 1982 whilst he was in exile in Germany (where they didn't find him, and killed his wife instead) the ministerial post was given to his sister as a reward for her loyalty.

The intention of this is to show that no place can be too remote for those who are against us, but those who are with us will be rewarded for their loyalty. Minister al-Attar is currently the Vice President for Cultural Affairs. With this being the first time a woman obtains this position, it could be argued that the regime has reached a stage where it needs to have a woman presidential deputy to point to as evidence for its secularist propaganda.

It would be possible to go on citing similar instances which demonstrate that appeals to secularism are nothing more than an empty slogan deployed by the regime only to appear different from its Islamist opponents. The guise of secularism and the championing of women's rights is one of the Syrian regime's cornerstones. Yet the reality faced by women is quite different. Away from the media, women are brutalised in their homes, raped and murdered on the pretext of preserving honour, prevented from inheriting, and denied the right to choose their spouse.

## 'Honour Killings' and Violence against Women

So-called 'honour killings' are one of the worst injustices facing women in Syria. The killers themselves enjoy the protection afforded them by the penal code. Women are eliminated for no better reason than suspicion over their behaviour or for marrying outside the sect. Sometimes they are killed for claiming their inheritance. Despite amendments to article 548 of the penal code, which stipulates that the penalty for honour killing should be a minimum of five to seven years imprisonment, the discretionary powers afforded judges mean that murderers can escape unpunished to this day.

Until very recently, coverage of this issue and others like it was kept out of the media. When the regime signed up to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2002, it lifted its ban on covering women's rights related issues in the media. Because the security services did not classify the women's rights movement as a purely political phenomenon, as they do in Iran for instance, it was suddenly possible to discuss issues such as violence against women.

In 2005, for the first time in its history, the General Women's Union produced a study on violence against women that was written with the assistance of independent experts. The study found that one in four Syrian women had been subjected to some form of violence. However its publication was not, regrettably, followed by any official recognition that violence against women was an issue in Syrian society, and no measures were taken or laws issued to prevent its occurrence. This is despite a draft law on the subject having been drawn up by Syrian women activists and legal experts, ready for approval by the regime; this document has been sitting in a drawer in the presidential office for years. Neither were any new centres for women victims of violence opened. There used to be only two shelters, run by the church in Damascus and Aleppo, but they proved unable to deal with the rising number of women seeking help. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour runs another centre, but it is more like a prison than a place of sanctuary.

## Signing CEDAW – a Change for Women's Rights?

Despite signing up to CEDAW in 2002, the Syrian regime has expressed official reservations about the most important articles of the convention, rendering it meaningless.

In 2009 the contradiction between the state's secular façade and its religious reality was at its starkest, when a secret committee of sheikhs (including a prominently conservative sheikh) was tasked with drawing up a new personal affairs law. The draft that resulted was based on an understanding of women as incompetent and subordinate to men. As a result, for the first time rights groups and civil society activists have succeeded in preventing a law from being passed.

At the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011, the regime used its propaganda machine to influence world opinion, highlighting in particular its role in fighting terrorism. Inside the country, however, it consolidated its anti-women policies, using women as a means of pressurising opposition families into submission. The detention of thousands of women and children has been documented, with many taken as hostages to pressure male family members to turn themselves over. Also documented are the cases of women being raped and tortured for the same purpose. Nor were 'loyalist' women exempt from these violations. Cases of regime loyalists sexually exploiting the wives of soldiers and civilians killed defending the regime, taking advantage of their economically vulnerable situation or under the pretext of protecting the women after they became widows, have also been documented.

When it comes to fighting the civil war in Syria, the allegedly secular regime heavily relies on the assistance of sectarian militias. What is also remarkable that in its struggle to earn secular credentials, at the same time it has established a female battalion, 'The Lionesses of al-Assad'. Pictures of these women are widely circulated in the media but fail to ever show them in armed combat. On the political side, the regime is also performing a u-turn. Before 2011, the regime tried to prove its secularism by keeping veiled women out of sight. Now, it tries to conceal its sectarian nature by promoting a veiled woman to the cabinet in order to counter reporting that argues the war is being fought in a way, which changes Syrian demographics at the expense of the majority.

## Rhetoric and Practice

There has always been a discrepancy between the regime's alleged secularism and its actual practices. This started with Hafez al-Assad. Despite his rhetoric, Hafez al-Assad decided to turn his back on pan-Arabism and ally himself with Iran after it had become the Islamic Republic of Iran and adopted a clear

confessional agenda. However, the regime now needs its secular appearance more than ever, with the image of women's rights and freedoms at the beacon. This is because these are one of the few ways in which it can positively distinguish itself from the Islamists the West is most concerned about. Given the blatant violations of women's rights in the context of crushing the Syrian revolution however, it is increasingly hard for the regime, to maintain this illusion.

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

<sup>1</sup> Articles 2, 9, 15, 16 and 29, for more information see also : <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm#article1>.





# Envisioning a Better Future: The Importance of Arab Women in Pursuing Democracy

Hoda El Khatib Chalak



Hoda El Khatib Chalak is an Attorney at Law and an Instructor of Law at Saint Joseph University, Lebanon, where she teaches Human Rights and Citizenship, Criminology, and Administrative Law. She is currently the President of the Organisation for Civil Activities and co-founder and coordinator for the Forum of Arab Civil Society Strategies. Hoda was Vice President of the Lebanese Organization for Human Rights from 1998 to 2001. Her research interests include democracy, civil society, transitional justice, citizenship and human rights. In addition, she is the co-author of the 'Best Practices Manual on Democracy Education', and of the 'Curriculum University of the Arab Civil Society'. She holds a Masters degree in Law from Saint Joseph University, Lebanon, where she also did her undergraduate studies.

The issue of women's involvement in decision-making in general, and in policy-making in particular, is still a controversial one, and the focus of great attention on the part of democracy, human rights, and citizenship activists. This is especially true in the Arab world, which is witnessing an exceptionally bloody political shift requiring the recruitment of all available resources to promote and entrench stability there.

This stability can only be generated by making space for women in policy-making. Women are not only participants in the popular movements across the region, but have used their voices to call for peace. Amidst the violent conflicts in the region, women have shown themselves ready to participate in securing stability. These are the very women for whom political conflict has come at the price of their honour and dignity, the breakup of their families, the loss of their ability to actively influence the events that contribute to their marginalisation, and a considerable diminishment of their role in society at the hands of extremists.

Both before and during the changes, which have swept the Arab world, one problem continues to confront us: despite all the studies of women's political participation and the many conferences and seminars convened to discuss the issue, progress on the ground has been extremely limited. That said, we cannot overlook the developments that have taken place in some Arab countries in recent years. Societies that did not recognise any political role for women have started to appoint women to positions within elected and administrative bodies, including parliament. Albeit in a tokenistic and elitist fashion, this has begun to clear the way for their participation.

Therefore, it could be claimed that many

of the obstacles which have been standing for almost two decades have been overcome. But the above does not mean that we can become complacent that women's roles will continue to expand. Quite the opposite: it poses problems of a new kind.

Can women's work be situated so that women come to constitute half of the electorate? Is civil society capable of mobilising men and women who support women's rights to create a change of attitude regarding the importance of making full use of those who constitute half of society? Degrees of women's participation, the quality and nature of their performance in these roles, their ability to influence politics, political parties, and civil society organisations, and the extent of their involvement in the ongoing struggle for freedoms and human rights in the Arab world must be at the forefront of discussions about their changing place in society.

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, affirmed the pressing need for women to participate in decision-making processes and to hold political office. The Beijing Declaration was ratified by a number of countries, yet women in the Arab world are still far less likely to hold leadership positions or participate in the decision-making process, whether in the legislative, executive or legal branches, than elsewhere in the world.

Although differences between the various Arab states must be taken into account, the representation of women in parliamentary bodies in Arab countries is the lowest in the world. Some Arab countries do not allow women to hold positions in the judiciary; in countries where this is permitted, it is only a very recent phenomenon. Similarly, the number of women holding ministerial portfolios is very low indeed, even with some ministries being

set aside specifically for women. This is not to mention the almost total lack of women occupying positions as regional governors, or as military and security officers.

Following the Beijing conference efforts may have been made to include women in the decision-making process, but they have fallen far short of what is needed to ensure their meaningful participation. There are many difficulties and obstacles to be overcome if women want to engage in public work. Some are related to the economic status of women and some with the political system itself. Other factors stem from society and prevalent cultural values.

On the subject of obstacles, we should pause to examine some basic points. It is important to be aware of the difference between women's participation in the electoral process (parliamentary and local) and their presence in executive and judicial posts, which are filled by appointment. For would-be politicians, the electoral process – whose foundations women were involved in laying – tends to be based not only on serving the public interest, but on furthering personal ambitions. Since success in such a competition requires experience, we find that women are disadvantaged, due to the fact that they tend to be newcomers in their engagement with electoral mechanisms.

For instance, taking into account the common practice of manipulating caps on campaign, we find that women frequently find it hard to raise even the legally permitted maximum. Add to that the influence peddling and the exchange of political and material interests that women are forced to endure within non-democratic systems. Furthermore, societies themselves are often in need of programs to raise awareness of democratic



Police running over protesters during the 2016 garbage protests in Beirut  
© Marwan Tahtah

practices, beginning at the earliest educational stages, with the objective of changing stereotypical attitudes towards the role and capabilities of women within the decision-making process. Extremist religious discourse also negatively impacts the acceptance of women in the public sphere.

One phenomenon also worth mentioning here is the high proportion of women voters who do not support female candidates. This can stem from the female voter's lack of confidence in women, perhaps due to the fact that they too are affected by extremist religious discourse. Some women may also be led by the wishes of the men in their lives, who may not accept female candidates and urge their wives, sisters and daughters not to vote for them. A form of negative competitiveness also can occur between women – regrettably often from those who claim to support women's rights in principle.

The conclusion from the above is that a number of ideas around women's participation in the decision-making process must be challenged. The transformation of such attitudes and obstacles is closely bound up with the process of democratic transformation, respect for human rights, and a better understanding of citizenship.

On top of changing attitudes, many Arab states also require more equitable election laws. One of the principle means of achieving this is through the introduction of quotas. Some Arab countries, such as Tunisia, Iraq and Egypt, have implemented quota systems in order to raise levels of women's participation in politics. At the party political level these systems indisputably increase the numbers of women on local councils and in parliament. Therefore, women must work to advocate for the introduction of female quotas within their





*A woman demonstrating in Beirut in 2016 in response to the government's failure to solve the garbage crisis*  
© Hussein Baydoun

parties, as happened in Germany and some Scandinavian countries.

The quota system remains the source of much disagreement and debate between intellectuals and political activists. Divisions between those opposed to the idea and those who support it run deep, with all sides bringing their personal experience to the table. This is due to the failure to establish an environment accepting the concept of women's political participation.

Quotas are designed to be temporary measures to redress social imbalances, and not to compensate women for electoral incompetence. The Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) treats quotas as a form of positive discrimination, but it is not clear that Arab countries will lay the necessary groundwork for adopting such systems. CEDAW states that all countries implementing quota systems must take a number of preparatory steps, including changes to social attitudes, since the quota system is by its very nature only a step on the ladder to realising full equality.

We must therefore ask whether those women who have successfully reached decision-making positions have effected any change in this regard – or whether, like men, they have simply implemented the policies of the powers that be. Have they changed men's view of women at all, so that when the quota system is abolished, male voters will elect female candidates? To what extent is women's political performance linked to women's issues? What types of women have entered elected bodies under the quota system?

Another approach to bolstering women's contributions to political life is to strengthen her role within the family. The majority of 'personal affairs' laws in Arab countries do not

support women's status in this regard, or afford her a role in domestic decision-making. They also restrict women's contribution to the public sphere, where she has a diminished presence and one subordinate to men. Therefore this sectarian, partisan, and (to coin a phrase) 'majority-ist' legislation is a major stumbling block to increasing their contribution to politics. Preparing an environment conducive to a balanced and effective female leadership must begin with the politics of home life and the foundation provided by the institutions of political education. There is a strong connection between personal affairs laws and the issue of women's political participation.

It is vital that all forms of discrimination against women be removed from Arab countries' laws. Although all Arab states are signatories to the majority of international treaties that are concerned with eradicating this form of discrimination, they have failed to align national laws and legislation with these commitments. Mechanisms must be put in place to enable women to carry out and render effective the roles given them, while their ability to achieve political office and participate in democracy-building requires widespread and comprehensive reforms, not piecemeal alterations.

The reality is that in most Arab countries it is the political regimes that determine the issue of women's participation. Non-democratic regimes will only ever allow the participation of those women of whom the regimes themselves approve. We need organisations and bodies that protect democracy, civil society, and our general rights and freedoms. Civil society groups concerned with women's participation must therefore be better organised if they are to advocate for women's capabilities to be sustainably built up.

Civil society is also one of the mechanisms by which women receive political experience and training. The electoral process – and the civil society organisations, activism, engagement, mobilisation, and participation it involves – remains the best way to teach the principles of democracy, especially to young people. This is despite the current prevalence of negative practices and the fact that many female candidates see their campaigns brought to an end by circumstances beyond their control.

However, as noted above, democracy is not only about elections. What is lacking in the Arab world is a culture of democracy. Women may be afforded rights by the constitution and the law, but it is only through a democratic culture that these will be upheld by our education and electoral systems, the enforcement of laws governing political parties, and an independent media.

This can only be altered through the work of civil society organizations responsible for political and social education. Through their work, democratic culture can be strengthened; curricula are changed, mechanisms for oversight are created, and organisations can continue working towards goals for governance, equality, equal opportunities and citizenship. By offering young people leading roles, and focusing attention on marginalised groups, a more inclusive society can be created.

The case of Lebanon raises an important question: why does it have one of the lowest rates of female parliamentary representation despite being one of the most democratic countries in the Arab world? Lebanon is arguably a great example of a country which is based upon democratic principles. It is one of the few Arab countries where the office of president is subject to the principle of rotation

of power. There is great scope for freedom of opinion and expression, the press and other media are relatively unfettered, and women enjoy extensive social freedoms. Furthermore, Lebanon has never experienced the one-party system: its party politics are characterised by pluralism and dissent.

However, despite these advantages, Lebanon has one of the lowest rates of female parliamentary representation in the Arab world. How, then, to reconcile this tangible political freedom – something which is seen to be a major factor in expanding women's participation in politics – with the limited participation of women in Lebanese political life? Is it that the Lebanese have created a form of consensus democracy for themselves which does not help promote the role of women? Or is it that Lebanese democracy is by definition sectarian?

At this juncture we must consider the role that civil society plays in Lebanon. In particular, questions must be raised about the work of women's organisations in shouldering the burden of women's issues and rights and working to bolster their participation in political life. Are Lebanese civil society organisations working in the field of rights and empowerment of women really doing enough?

In her article of June 2016, journalist Yara Nahla traced the differences between regions in Lebanon with regard to women's participation. She observed an increase in women's candidacies and electoral victories in the South and Mount Lebanon, and a decline in Akkar and Northern Lebanon. Beirut had the highest proportion of both female candidates and electoral victors.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>These results shed light on the changing realities of women's lives in Lebanon over time, and may also assist in comparing the status

and role of women in different regions, and possibly sects as well. Given the suspension of parliamentary elections, local elections are one of the most important indicators for women's participation in the public sphere and decision-making positions.<sup>1</sup>

Looking closer at the results gives a sense of how feeble the progress is being made in women's participation in decision-making, even at the local level. Can the concept of citizenship strengthen women's presence in politics, given all the customs and traditions and the sectarian and religious considerations that stand in their way?

New generations of citizens must be raised and educated to value equality and competence, and to understand the principle of the separation of the branches of state. This is the key to the creation of a democratic culture which votes for candidates as intermediaries between the electorate and the executive. Politicians must help people to resolve their difficulties with the authorities, and facilitate their access to services, utilities and employment offered by the institutions of state. It is imperative that there be legal mechanisms by which the citizen can secure his rights from government and that these are upheld by elected officials.

When we talk about politics, there is often an assumption made that we are referring to decision-making in the executive, legislative and judicial branches. However, politics is first and foremost about citizenship. Democracy is defined by the various ways in which this principle is expressed, be it through involvement in civil society or through the exercise of political power. The citizen voter is the foundation of the political process; it follows that every woman voter has the right to cast their ballot and stand for office independently.

Citizenship begins with the exercise of one's right to vote - and not just with regards to the main legislative assembly, but on all levels of the public administration. This can be within unions, the institutions of civil society, and municipal councils. To be a leader is to take responsibility for empowering as many people as possible. Effective leadership therefore means not only exercising citizenship rights, but becoming a political actor that takes on the responsibility of people's trust in you, and championing the principles by which you secure them a life of dignity.

Women must be simultaneously conscious of not only these responsibilities as political citizens, but of how their female identity may affect their capacity to navigate the political

sphere. If exercising one's citizenship means becoming involved in civil, social and public-political work, there must be organisations and bodies which grant women access to public life, so that women can join men in changing male attitudes. Women - even those who are 'Westernised' - standing together become a broad-based and influential voting bloc. In solidarity they can affect change amongst other women, and then society as a whole.

In addition to the importance of bringing together women's activism in civil society and political activism (whether this involves participation in political parties, student unions, syndicates, or voting/candidacy in elections) it is vital that women give as much of their attention to public affairs as they do to women's issues. This is a challenging balance to strike. Women cannot confine themselves to their own issues, but nor can they allow them to be erased, since women are a part of broader society and must work to create a base through pluralistic interventions. These include supporting women to achieve successful family lives which promote stability and creativity, and independence in economic, social and intellectual activities. These spheres are all vitally linked to political activism, political power, and those who exercise that power.

Enabling women's political participation requires the comprehensive involvement of society more broadly. In order to properly understand the concept of political participation we must examine - as many studies and analyses have done - women's political participation from three key perspectives.

The first is a gendered perspective. This acknowledges the fact that women are in general more likely to suffer from poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy, and to be underrepresented in political life. This inequality creates a structural gap between men and women that needs to be bridged. Second is a development perspective, which focuses on the need to ensure women and men are fully engaged together in the pursuit of democracy. This approach treats development as an economic issue and the equal political participation of men and women is understood from this perspective. The human rights perspective, finally, is based on the humanity of the individual and their right to all the guarantees of international human rights legislation.

Strengthening the leadership role played by women therefore requires attention being paid to the following points:

- Supporting the democratic transformation, and the concepts of human rights and citizenship.
- Promoting a culture of democracy and non-discrimination, as well as the right not to conform, pluralism, acceptance of the other, and concepts of gender identity.
- Recognising international agreements concerned with women's rights.
- Holding free and fair elections that guarantee the peaceful rotation of power, as one of the pillars of democracy.
- Changing the legal framework that governs political participation in general, and women's political participation in particular.
- Adopting the quota system as a temporary measure until such time as citizens are used to seeing women in positions of power, whether the quota is enforced by party political structures, or by the law itself.
- Setting up a fund for electoral campaigns and female candidates. The money could come from the female elites and other rich women, or otherwise the financially challenged (women in particular) could be funded out of the public purse.
- Providing training so that unqualified women do not reach leadership positions.
- Bringing together civil society work and political activism, whether party political or voting/standing in elections.
- Emphasis on the fact that woman must take the same interest in public affairs as they do in women's issues. Women cannot confine themselves to their issues, yet at the same time, nor should they be erased as they are a part of society.
- Bringing politics and public life together with training in political work from an early stage.
- Women supporting women in elections.
- Providing technical and media support to women in leadership positions or who are qualified for those positions.

- Improving the ability of civil society organizations to defend women's rights, by addressing their structure and work practices.
- Readyng a generation of women capable of asserting their presence and making an impact, so that they are able to make tangible achievements.
- Bringing local and foreign skills and experience together.
- Emphasising the importance of women's role in peace processes, reconciliation, and conflict resolution.
- Taking yearly measurements of the women's progress within the general economy.

Arab states cannot establish a democratic culture or pursue development goals which benefit all members of society if women do not play a role in shaping the decisions that affect both their private and public lives. If women do not receive access to their fair share of professional, administrative or economic opportunities, or participate in the institutions of state and decision-making bodies at all levels, we cannot achieve comprehensive development and build a new society. Enabling women's participation has become the most important challenge to realising progress based on social justice and democracy.

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

<sup>1</sup> Compare: Yara Nahla, the Independent Online Journal on [www.almodon.com](http://www.almodon.com), June 2, 2016: 'The National Council for Lebanese Women recorded a relative increase in women's candidacies and electoral victories in the Southern Lebanon and Mount Lebanon governorates and a decline in Akkar and Northern Lebanon. Between 2010 and 2016 the number of female candidates in Southern Lebanon rose from 101 to 185, and the number of winning candidates from 59 to 80. In Mt. Lebanon, candidates rose from 164 to 367 and winners from 164 to 227. In Akkar and Northern Lebanon there was a sharp drop in women's participation, with the number of female candidates dropping from 449 to 279 and the number of winning candidates from 229 to 138. Out of all the provinces, Beirut had the highest proportion of both female candidates (19.3 per cent of all candidates) and female electoral victors (12.5 per cent). Unsurprisingly, therefore, the capital also has the highest levels of female representation on the municipal council, followed by Northern Lebanon (with 7.7 per cent), Mt. Lebanon (with 6.4 per cent), Southern Lebanon (with 4.8 per cent), and Bekaa (with 2.5 per cent), with Nabatieh the governorate with the lowest rates of female representation at 1.87 per cent.'

# Feminist and Women's Struggles in Lebanon's 'Popular Movement': The Intersections of the Public and the Private

Leen Hashem



Leen Hashem is a leftist feminist living in Beirut, Lebanon. She holds a BA in Media Studies from the Lebanese University and an MA in Gender Studies from SOAS, University of London. Since 2009, Leen has been part of different leftist, secularist, queer and feminist groups in Lebanon. Since 2005, she has worked as a researcher, translator, editor, manager, trainer and policy advisor at different NGOs and projects. Leen was also a co-founder of 'Salwa', the anti-sexual harassment campaign established in 2010, and is currently an advisor for the MENA region at FRIDA The Young Feminist Fund. In addition, she has been a regular freelance contributor to the weekly youth supplement issued by the newspaper *As-Safir* on issues of feminism, gender, sexuality and rights.

The historical division of public and private generates a number of challenges and obstacles, not least for women, and in particular when they engage in political work in the public sphere as happened with the Popular Movement (Al-Hirak) that formed in July 2015 in Lebanon to demand a solution to the garbage and other crises resulting from the corruption and inefficiency of the Lebanese regime.

Women and the roles they play have historically been linked to the private sphere. Within the domestic realm, traditional gender norms demand women's submission to the authority of their fathers or husbands. Men, meanwhile, are associated with the public sphere and the economic, political, social and security functions this implies.

Because of these expectations, the public sphere in Lebanon has tended to be a difficult place for women to negotiate. Whilst their experiences might be mediated by their class, ethnic affiliations, age and appearance, not to mention the characteristics of whatever neighbourhood or region they come from, the public sphere is usually subject to mechanisms of control and censorship which make it a challenging place for women to fully inhabit. Customs and traditions around the appropriate place for women, the presence of security forces and surveillance through Closed Circuit Television (CCTV), as well as the public gaze all act to exclude women from public life.

The latter concern is a particularly effective deterrent. Men are more densely dispersed and affirm their presence in various ways; from raised voices, nakedness and public urination, moving around in gangs and groups and staying out late, to actual aggression and verbal and physical harassment against girls and women and anyone else who does not conform to traditional gender and social norms.

Such members of society are targeted in order for their harassers to assert control over public places.

Such hostile and exclusionary behaviours are accompanied by societal rationalisations based on the principle of the public/private. These preserve male control of the public sphere by placing the blame on women and others who are subjected to male violence for leaving their 'natural' private sphere. By entering the public sphere at the wrong place, or the wrong time, or wearing the wrong clothes, or with the wrong companions, or for the wrong reason, they are seen to be inviting harassment. According to this logic the public sphere is the natural possession of men and the majority of their actions within it are justified and excusable; it is the responsibility of women to protect themselves by not entering this sphere and keeping to the boundaries of their homes or, at the very least, their immediate neighbourhoods.

However, these spaces are in turn subject to precisely delineated protocols of behaviour and censorship and the dynamics of male protection (and non-protection) which are enforced, for example, by the young men of the area. This narrative also ignores the fact that within the private sphere, women are not necessarily any safer; at home they also face male violence, which is protected and justified by customs, traditions, laws and religious edicts.

This exclusionary censorship of the public sphere is historically one of the most common forms of political, economic and social marginalization of women. It finds its most blatant expression in incidents of direct violence such as harassment, robbery, rape, detention, or state violence. As the margin for movement for many Lebanese women expands and sees them entering the public sphere with

increasing regularity, these incidents increase. However, despite this, women have continued to defy obstacles and assert their presence in public places in a variety of forms, both in their daily lives and as part of organized frameworks such as political activism, protest, and popular demonstrations.

## Women in the Movement: A More Overt Presence

Directly and indirectly, in both organized and spontaneous forms, women have long been part of political, national, union and rights struggles in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> In Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia and, of course, in Lebanon<sup>2</sup>, women have drawn up and led mobilisation campaigns, participated in protests, organised meetings, joined the armed struggle against a range of mandate regimes and occupiers, comforted and protected their families and wider society, preserved their discipline in the most trying of circumstances, been subject to violence and detention, and gone on hunger strike. They have persisted in their struggles and often won out. What were the recent uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, or the Popular Movement in Lebanon, except the latest steps along this road?<sup>3</sup>

Yet these contributions have always encountered neglect and suppression as a natural extension of the marginalisation of women and their actions, contributions, and histories more broadly. The written history with which we are familiar is mostly a history written by men about the lives and deeds of men who came before them, whilst due to this marginalisation, women's histories have by-and-large had to operate within the framework of oral storytelling and tales passed down through generations. This is why it is so

important that these histories be salvaged and documented.

This can also explain the sense of shock some have when they witness women participating in public struggle. Their histories of doing so have been excised from popular consciousness and official historical narratives, which, compounded by the historical stereotyping of women as willingly relegated to the domestic sphere, make it difficult for many to conceive of them as actors in political life. In fact, women's political labour is not new, but it has always been marginalized and suppressed in formalised arenas of political action such as parties, unions, municipalities and civil society organisations which are dominated by a hegemonic patriarchal mentality and culture, in addition to not being taken seriously enough, or regarded with sufficient interest, to earn recognition, documentation or coverage.

In the summer of 2015, women participated in the Popular Movement in Lebanon on different levels and in different areas. These ranged from leadership and decision-making roles, to organizing, working in the field, media coverage and media appearances, involvement in the production of knowledge, analysis, public political discourse and reports, as well, of course, as entering street battles against the security forces, and being subjected to beatings, abuse and detention (e.g. Nidal Ayoub, Yara Al Harake, and others).<sup>4</sup> In her testimony on her arrest for participating in a protest in Beirut, the photographer Maya Malkani stated that she was beaten and threatened with sexual violence whilst in custody.<sup>5</sup> A critical and intersectional feminist discourse appeared in the reports and literature of groups such as 'The People Want' Coalition and in the work of the Feminist Bloc, which participated in demonstrations beneath the slogan 'The Patriarchal Regime Kills!'



Women's participation in the Popular Movement was nothing new or any cause for shock; they came equipped with experience derived from a long history in demand-based political activism and organizing. However, various factors helped highlight their contributions in this particular case. These included developments in media and social networking and their increased use by women; and the increased presence of women in the public sphere anyway.<sup>6</sup> The inchoate nature of the movement itself also promoted inclusivity; it incorporated groups and demands so diverse as to be contradictory (especially at first) and was built around organic and youth-centred groups whose internal structures for the most part differed from those of the traditional parties and party institutions which tended to exclude women.<sup>7</sup>

### Interlinked Battles and Intersecting Struggles

The effective involvement of women in the movement should not be allowed to obscure the discriminatory patriarchal actions that targeted women, including non-Lebanese women and transgendered women, who had also taken to the streets to raise their voices against exploitation and marginalisation. Moreover, young men from marginalised working-class neighbourhoods like al-Khandaq al-Ghamiq, Hayy al-Sillom and al-Tariq al-Jadida, were labelled 'fifth-columnists' or 'plants', and faced demonization by certain media organisations and affiliated movement groups, not to mention the violence they were subjected to by the security forces, the detentions and the military trials.<sup>8</sup> From gendered violence deployed by the security forces against women demonstrators and activists to dynamics of silencing,

marginalisation and exclusion exercised in coordination meetings of movement groups until they had been completely purged of women participants, then treating women's concerns and issues as matters of secondary importance to the 'greater struggle'; through the gendered insults, slogans and banners that were carried in demonstrations and deployed women's bodies and homosexual imagery to insult the regime, to immigrant, dark-skinned, and transgender women being bullied and expelled, incidents of sexual harassment during the demonstrations of September 20, 2015, and mocking videos made by 'male activists' on social media mocking women's testimonies of harassment (not to mention regarding the documentation of harassment events as 'slurs on the movement's honour', which speaks of a purely masculinist mindset built on violent patriarchal concepts such as honour, protection and machismo).<sup>9</sup>

This reality shows the urgent need for a radical critique and a deconstruction of hegemonic patriarchal cultural, ethical, linguistic and moral structures. Drawing on Marxist, radical and intersectional schools of feminism, this critique must be an integral component to the political struggle of the Popular Movement. This is what many women and feminists within the movement have been calling for throughout, and indeed have been practicing in both their response to patriarchal aggressions in online, discursive and linguistic spaces, as well as in the public space in Riyad al-Solh Square and Martyrs' Square. In this way, feminists have rejected the concept of token female participation or the quota system followed by the traditional parties and institutions of state as essentially meaningless indicators of modernity and inclusivity.

Instead of this quota approach that some

of the movement groups have attempted to follow, feminists insisted through their discourses and actions that there should be a bold and realistic public evaluation of the true nature and quality of the space afforded to women within the movement and of its hidden gender dynamics, even if this comes at the expense of the idealized image sought for the movement, and even if this exposes them to attacks, mockery and bullying, as well as failed attempts to silence them by the supposed 'leaders of change'.

In this sense, women in the Popular Movement were not political day-trippers. The movement was a critical experience that deserves serious reflection and examination and courageous self-critique. Yet it is also important

to point out that this movement created a political and public space in and through which women engaged in public, private and personal struggles against corruption, state violence, societal and patriarchal violence, and tactics of effacement, marginalisation and exclusion from decision-making and a physical presence in the public sphere.<sup>10</sup> This reflects an intersectionality of struggles in women's daily lives. This intersectionality and its tangible manifestations within the movement (see above for examples) shows that feminist and women's issues cannot be subordinate or secondary in any popular movement demanding revolutionary change, but are organically bound to these demands. It has become blindingly clear that for political activism to be revolutionary the presence of



women is required; particularly, the presence of critical feminist thought is required at the heart of political action and revolutionary philosophy for change.

Drawing on feminist theory and feminist tools of analysis and action may in fact be of benefit to the movement and other political movements in Lebanon and the region. The ethical frameworks of these theories entail a critical deconstruction of the dynamics of power and oppression and draw on integrity, intersectionality and solidarity to lay the foundations of political work.

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

- 1 We give, by way of example, the experience of the Kafa (Enough Violence and Exploitation) association in drawing up the law for the protection of women from domestic violence in 2014, the ongoing struggle within the My Nationality is a Right for Me and My Family campaign which worked for the right of Lebanese women to pass on their nationality to their non-Lebanese husbands and their children, and the experience of the Domestic Workers Union which was founded by immigrant women workers on January 25 2015 and represented a milestone for the workers' movement and for organized labour in Lebanon. It was turned down flat by Minister of Labour, Sejaan Azzi, who has so far refused to grant it a license. For more see Eva Shoufi's article in *Al Akhbar*, February 1 2016: <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/251104>.
- 2 In 'Workers without unions; Unions without workers' (Issue 6 of *The Permanent Revolution*, January 2016) ([permanentrevolution-journal.org/ar/node/136](http://permanentrevolution-journal.org/ar/node/136)) Farah Kobeissi gives examples of early nineteenth-century independent women's labour activism in the silk factories of Mount Lebanon and then in Regie after they had been excluded from organized labour, their story of their struggle subsequently left out of the writings of unionists and historians of the labour movement.
- 3 There is no intention of romanticizing women's activism, since many women supported the zuama and traditional, rightwing and conservative political parties in Lebanon, as well as participating (as they still do) in armed sectarian conflicts such as the Lebanese civil war. Women's political struggle is not necessarily revolutionary simply because they are women, a fact that hints at the realistic and materialistic nature of political activity.
- 4 When thinking about the concept of leadership and the personality of the leader (male or female), it is vital to take into account the power dynamics within the group and the social, educational, class and gender privileges enjoyed by those individuals who are more likely to be given leadership roles.
- 5 Watch Maya Malkani's testimony here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxdtAp-rkpc>.
- 6 For reasons too numerous to list in full here, but which include the transformation in forms of labour, the operation of capital, rising levels of education, emigration, urban sprawl, changing gender relations, and of course the women's/

feminist struggle with its long history (though the last twenty years in particular), not to mention the emergence over the last decade of feminist groups in youth and student circles which advance radical discourses in critiquing the state and society.

- 7 As well as demanding a solution to the garbage crisis, the Popular Movement incorporated a variety of issue-based demands into its demonstrations and sit-ins including rights for families of workers at the Anfeh salt factories, rights for teachers and civil defense force volunteers, the campaign to protect Beirut's 'Dalieh' or coastal commons, denouncing the kafala system that determines the lives of foreign workers, denouncing anti-refugee xenophobia, and other issues relating to women, even gender-identity and sexuality. All this was evident from the slogans and banners and the types of people who took part, making the space formed by these demonstrations unstructured, unrestricted and uncontrolled, different from the environment created by Lebanon's traditional parties and coalitions. The space was open and inchoate, especially in the beginning, capable of absorbing various groups of people and a broad spectrum of demands. It should be noted that there is a need for a deeper and more precise evaluation of the movement's political, material and discursive space and the dynamics of how the different classes and issues interacted within it.
- 8 Confirming the organic intersection of masculinity, misogyny, racism, classism, homophobia, femiphobia, transphobia, since all these forms of violence and exclusion are premised on a repressive patriarchal structure that imposes its values, judgments, laws with a variety of violent means both direct and indirect for the sake of preserving the status quo in the face of attempted resistance and change and safeguarding the interests and power of those with gender, class, ethnic and religious privilege at the expense of more vulnerable communities and individuals with less access to power and protection, as part of a power dynamic justified, protected and propagated via a variety of pretexts such as 'nature' and 'the public good', concepts which when deconstructed are shown to be invalid and illogical.
- 9 For detailed examples from these incidents and others see 'What's feminism got to do with it? Is there a need for feminism in Lebanon's current protests?' ([www.sawtalniswa.org/article/506](http://www.sawtalniswa.org/article/506)) by Stephanie Gaspais and Lamia Moghnie in *Sawt Al Niswa*; *Sawt Al Niswa* documented testimonies of women who had been subjected to harassment: <http://www.sawtalniswa.org/article/511>; to read more on the experiences of women in the movement see contributions to the Gendered Aspects of the Movement panel organized by the American University in Beirut on November 28, 2015 and published in its entirety on the Socialist Forum's *Al-Manshour* website here: <http://al-manshour.org/node/6604>.
- 10 I presented an analysis of the patriarchal ethics of political work as practiced by the Lebanese regime as part of my contribution to the panel referred to in the above note, and these are ethics that impede women and others and they challenge it back in their daily and political lives. Read my contribution here: <http://al-manshour.org/node/6604>.

## In Order to Be Taken Seriously

Marcell Shehwaro

Immediately after we'd finished discussing the challenges facing Aleppo in front of a large audience I was asked by a friend of mine, a leading figure in the Syrian civil society movement, how I was able to appear so unmoved, without anger or emotion, even when talking about the most painful experiences of my life and my losses, such as my mother being martyred; the interrogations I had faced, or other similar incidents, experienced by all Syrian activists such as myself. Sometimes, he said, he was afraid he might one day break down on stage and they'd say 'Those Syrians! Babies. So emotional!'

'It's so much easier for me', I replied. 'I'm a woman'. We practice this self-control every day: with our fellow Syrians, with our co-workers, and at times, with ourselves. We never stop trying to be taken seriously.'

I started my current job as director of a civil society organization more than two years ago. Over time, I regretfully came to accept that I would be begrudged every word of praise I received, and that when it came, men were the standard by which I was judged. 'Sister of men!' I was called. 'I swear Marcell, you're worth a hundred men!' came as a compliment; and I got used to ignoring the looks of surprise and eyebrows raised whenever I'd offer an opinion on politics.

As I summed it up: 'For a woman to succeed in public life is an exception that is thought to deserve the closest scrutiny, as though it meant a man must have failed.' In the beginning, every detail about my presence had to be cautiously monitored in order for me 'to be taken seriously': What I wore as a woman constantly surrounded by men; how I was to sideline my gender in all my professional interactions. For a long time I disguised my femininity. I wore loose or strictly formal clothing; smiling as

little as possible; holding all and any pleasant advances from the opposite sex at arms' length, with a determination that sometimes bordered on hostility; my hair tied back.

To be taken seriously I also worked to be as far removed from people's pre-conceptions as possible. I anticipated their accusations, and fought to show that I am not in this job because I 'm a pretty young woman, or because I'm associated with a man, or because I'm looking for a man, or because they need to meet a gender quota, or some ridiculous quantum of non-*hijab* wearing women in the workplace. And in order to resist all these accusations – sometimes voiced, sometimes just implied – I was obliged to devote all my time and redoubled effort to this same principle: taking care of the details.

Even now, after speaking publically about my organization's achievements or the challenges I face as an activist in Syria, some people still think it's entirely appropriate to ask questions like 'but do you dress like that in Syria?' The fact that I don't wear a *hijab* (or to reverse it: that I have a number of co-workers who do) is still seen as some vitally significant summation of what I and my fellow women represent in life. Even now, during the job interviews I conduct for the organization, I'll encounter applicants who assume I'm the secretary, and that 'Marcel', the Executive Director, will be along shortly to sit in on the process.

The questions posed to me by my interrogator at the security branch still make me laugh. 'Why are you supporting the revolution? Are you in a relationship with a Sunni man, perhaps?' It's a neat abridgment of who I'm presumed to be: a 'Christian' woman whose political position must be down to some man seducing and brainwashing me.

Effort on effort, the details' details, all so



Marcell Shehwaro is the Executive Manager of the organization 'Kesh Malek' and is a courageous activist and blogger from Aleppo in Syria. Marcell is working on promoting children's rights in the seven schools that the organisation runs in Aleppo. They also launched the project 'The Identity of a Nation', which is a series of social-cultural centres aimed at motivating citizens to express their national identity as a way of countering radical and extreme narratives within the Syrian society. Marcell has participated in many national and international conferences and discussion panels about education, women's rights, and the role of the civil society within Syria. She has initiated and participated in many awareness raising campaigns against both extremist Islam and the Syrian regime. In addition to advocating widely about human rights in Syria Marcell has degrees in Dentistry and International Relations, and an MA in Human Rights and Cultural Diversity from the University of Essex, UK. In 2015 her online series *Dispatches from Syria* won a 2015 Online Journalism Award in the category of Online Commentary.



we don't lose our tempers. They say our moods affect how we run our organization: that we mustn't cry if we don't want to be told that our decisions are 'emotional'. Details on details, so we don't get trapped in the cliché where some seek to confine us: Middle Eastern women who cling to big tough men.

To be taken seriously, we women mustn't disagree with one another, even when it comes to politics. It might be that we don't agree about some position or other – 'Imagine... the United Women Party don't all hold the same position on Geneva, or the opposition, or armed revolution, or federalism, or the oil price...!' – but it is far from easy to express those differences.

Men however frequently disagree in public life: Islamist vs. secularists; those for the armed revolution and against it; for liberating new territory and against; no-fly zones, no no-fly zones. They fight out these positions in articles and through boycotts; they withdraw and break away, while we live our lives under pressure, unable to speak our dissent to avoid being subjected to idiocies like 'the first enemy of women are women!' or 'you women don't support one another', or even 'you women don't like one another!'

Men are expected to show dissent when expressing their political views. Women just love or loathe each other.

To be taken seriously we must resist all the uses to which we are put in public life. We are used as pawns by dictatorships to motivate or repress their populations without bloodletting. We are used as symbols by political movements to signal liberal attitudes they don't believe in. We are used as tokens by players in the international community to promote the idea that 'Syrian women' have a decision-making role in the political process when the truth is that all Syrians, men and women alike, have been excluded from making any decisions when it comes to Syria.

We must resist these stereotypes that are foisted upon us. The victim – from whom we well-intentioned onlookers will cheerfully purchase any handcraft, however poorly-made,

purely because 'she's a Syrian refugee.' The saintly heroine who never breaks down, no matter what, because she represents the 'honour' of the glorious homeland. The devoted helpmeet of the soldier or *jihadi* who fulfils misogynist dreams of the Oriental woman 'dancing in the background' – or, in Syria's case, murmurs of *'sexual jihad'* and the like. To be taken seriously, we are expected to be constantly present and ready for anything. We are forced to prove our qualifications, our years of experience and employment, and sometimes of detention and revolutionary activism. We must draw attention to the languages we speak, our special skills and talents.

Men in public life don't face many questions about their talents or their right to be there. Any comment they make about gender equality, representation, and participation, is followed by 'though they must be qualified.' Men are 'qualified' by virtue of being men, of course. Although Syrian men might face this kind of questioning themselves when they enter the world of international civil society organizations and encounter their employees, we face it every day, and in all languages.

To be taken seriously, we are constantly having to convince others that our political interests go further than The Women's Bureau, or the women's councils, or the Advisory Board, or issues connected with the rights of women and children. That we are interested in democracy, not just in 'working towards peace'.

We are activists and feminists and defenders of human rights. We are not just the martyr's mother or sister, or the detainee's wife. We have to brandish our history and our sacrifices to gain any legitimacy. To be taken seriously we have to fight all the time and on all fronts, within our organizations and outside of them, and yet, at the same time, in all these battles, we must avoid being seen as angry or tense.

And when the battles are over – battles that countless Syrian women have fought and won – they put us neatly into the box marked 'exceptions' and rest easy.

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

## Between Trauma and Resistance: Feminist Engagement with the Arab Spring

Honaida Ghanim

These days, to ask what effect the Arab Spring had on women is to pose a question which seems ridiculous, irrelevant almost, given the bloody and brutal outcomes of revolutions in countries such as Syria, Libya and Yemen, and the ongoing repercussions of the uprising in Egypt, which leave no room for doubt that the dreams of the millions who demonstrated in Egypt's Tahrir Square in 2011 chanting 'Bread, Liberty and Social Justice' and calling for 'Dignity and Freedom' widespread in Syria, Libya and Yemen, have become terrifying nightmares which have touched on the lives of all members of society. But the progressive feminist movement across the Middle East is recovering from a particularly traumatic ride, and are finding they are being forced to fight again on issues which were on the table at the very birth of the movement and were felt by many to have been reconciled.

It should be recognised that the negative impact of the Arab Spring's outcomes have not only affected women and their struggle for rights. The barrel bombs the Assad regime continues to drop on Aleppo do not distinguish between gender or age or political affiliation. Likewise, the economic collapse in Egypt does not target women alone; it hurts everybody. The munitions of the Saudi-led Arab coalition in Yemen are equal opportunity. The massacres taking place in Syria, Libya and Yemen affect the lives of everyone living in the conflict zones, without discrimination on the basis of class, or gender, or age. With the exception of perhaps Tunisia, the only kind of equality to be found in the Arab world these days appears to be equality before the barrel of a gun.

The Arab revolutions' descent from a dream of freedom and justice to a nightmare of bloodshed and pitched battles goes hand-in-hand with the decline in the status of

women, both in real and symbolic terms. This parallels the reactionary tendency seen in public political discourse on women's issues and rights in recent years. The sheer brutality of violations carried out against women and their rights has come as a shock to feminists, whose feminist discourse had previously inhabited a bubble of post-colonialist and post-modernist theory and cultural relativism which has been unable to keep pace with the developments in the Middle East.

### Arab Feminist Discourse: A Battle on All Fronts

On the eve of the Arab Spring, Arab feminist discourse had progressed significantly through its engagement with gender and post-colonial theories. It took on both orientalist and Islamist discourses and attempted to offer alternative readings of various societal dynamics, especially those related to women's rights, while identifying centres of power and resistance within patriarchal systems in the Middle East. It was in this context that the writings of various feminists gained traction, including Fatima Mernissi<sup>1</sup> from Morocco, Leila Ahmed<sup>2</sup> and Saba Mahmood<sup>3</sup> from Egypt, and the Tunisian author Raja Bensalama.

The work of these feminist researchers contributed to the deconstruction of systems of power affecting the status of women within Islam, both in practice and thought, and it did so by engaging with Western modernist thought on the one hand and with post-colonial and post-modern critical theory on the other. The discourse of these feminists was directed inwards, at their own societies, but it was also addressed to those centres of research in Western academia that produce culturalist and Orientalist theories, reinforced by Islamophobia



Honaida Ghanim is a Palestinian sociologist and anthropologist. She has been the General Director of The Palestinian Forum of Israeli Studies (MADAR) in Ramallah since 2009. Honaida has published various articles and studies in the fields of political and cultural sociology and gender studies. She is author of 'Reinventing the Nation: Palestinian Intellectuals and Persons of Pen in Israel 1948-2000' (The Hebrew University, 2009), the Editor of 'On Recognition of the Jewish State' (MADAR, 2014), and the co-Editor of 'On the Meaning of a Jewish state' (MADAR, 2011). Honaida was the Chief Editor of the quarterly journal Qadaya Israella (Israeli Affairs) between 2000-2011, and has been the Chief Editor of MADAR's *Strategic Report* since 2009. She holds a PhD with distinction from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and has lectured in various universities in Palestine.



or anti-hegemonic critiques.

The rise of terrorist movements such as al-Qaida, especially post-September 11 2001, played a huge part in intensifying theoretical polarisation around issues of Islam, modernism, cultural backwardness, progress and the rights of women and minority groups. At the same time the involvement of feminists in these debates was intensified. As a result Western epistemology enjoyed an unprecedented degree of hegemony, and Arab feminist discourse was thus largely reshaped along the lines of these priorities.

Amongst feminist activists operating in Arab societies, efforts intensified to institutionalise hitherto organic and unstructured 'popular' feminist movements. A majority of these made the transformation into non-governmental organisations linked to foreign or governmental funding, with their priorities governed directly or indirectly by the attitudes of their funders. A growing focus on the part of these organisations has been to change legislation and achieve influence via the political elites, while focusing on issues of sexual assault, gendered vocabulary, and awareness-raising of women's rights and empowerment.

Yet this feminist activism - devoted to issues of empowerment, gender theory and equality, and populated by women who had fought for the implementation of international agreements on women's rights - found itself confronted, without warning, with criminally barbaric violations of women's rights committed by terrorist groups which sought to return women to the 'dark ages'. Organisations such as al-Qaida, Jabhat al-Nusra and other Salafist movements enforced the wearing of the *niqab*, begun to ban women from leaving their homes, or, as in the case of Daesh, revived trade in female slaves.

The January revolution in Egypt, which initially provided a great boost to female political participation, soon degenerated with chilling effects on women. The deliberate use of systematic mass assaults against women for political ends, and a reactionary, fundamentalist gender discourse came to the fore. This gulf between the progress made in feminist discourse and the feminist movement's achievements on the one hand, and on the other, the revival of medieval attitudes towards women's rights, came as a great shock to feminists.

The consequences of this shift are still felt to this day. The Afghan-Taliban cliché of the wholly-covered woman hidden from the public gaze, which had once seemed peculiar, to put it mildly, as a model of political governance, has

become paradigmatic image of political power across large areas at the heart of the Arab world. The gulf that lay between progressive Arab feminist discourse and the lived reality of the revolutions has forced feminists who had initially supported the revolutions to re-evaluate their position.

The impact these popular movements were having on the gains they had made and the consequences of political Islam on the status of women in the region is impossible to ignore.<sup>4</sup> More damaging still, the feminist movement, feminists and female activists have found themselves having to debate and discuss the same issues which had confronted the pioneers of Arab feminism such as the *hijab*, child marriage and education.

### From Revolutionaries to Objects of Shame

Statistics from Egypt show that women participated in large numbers in the demonstrations that filled Tahrir Square in 2011 up until the resignation of Hosni Mubarak. Some claim that women made up between 40 - 50 per cent of demonstrators in the square, and were drawn from all social and ideological backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> This figure would constitute an unprecedented level of female participation in political demonstrations. Understood in its most inclusive sense, the revolutionary slogan 'Bread, Liberty, and Social Justice' serves as a call to improve the reality of women's lives as equal and free citizens of the republic. Women such as Asmaa Mahfouz and Nawara Nigm came to the fore as leaders.

But all this optimism was dealt a slap in the face on the first post-revolution Women's Day on March 8, when women marching for gender equality were subjected to physical harassment and verbal abuse. The very next day a sit-in protest in Tahrir Square was broken up by security forces, and eighteen young women were arrested and taken to military prison. At least seven of them were subjected to forced virginity tests, with the army offering the justification that they wished to guard against any potential future claims that they had raped their detainees.<sup>6</sup>

The struggle was rapidly crystallising into a fight between two groups, neither of which cared in the slightest about women's rights. On the one hand, the Islamists, who were the only organised opposition movement, and on the other was the military, who controlled the apparatus of state repression. Youth, women's, and civil society forces were marginalised by this concentration of power within the

Islamist movement, and following the 2012 elections which saw the Muslim Brotherhood installed in government, women occupied only two per cent of seats in the lower chamber.<sup>7</sup> According to a report by the Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights (entitled '2012: the Year of the Exodus of the Egyptian Woman') Egypt saw the single greatest decline of any country in the international rankings for female political participation, dropping to 126<sup>th</sup> place overall.<sup>8</sup>

Quite aside from this decline in women's representation, Egypt has seen sexual harassment become a systematically deployed technique for deterring women from participating in demonstrations and strikes. During celebrations on the second anniversary of the revolution in Tahrir these tactics even included rape.<sup>9</sup> According to the anti-harassment and sexual assault unit, the celebrations in Tahrir were marred by terrifying crimes against women. The unit received nineteen reports of mass sexual assaults that had taken place in and around the square, some of them involving attempted murder and resulting in permanent injuries.

Nobody can know for sure who was behind these assaults on women in public places, but there can be no doubt that they were organised with political objectives in mind; to first and foremost intimidate women, and secondly to

promote a sense of insecurity and lawlessness. These incidents became a medium for both the military and the Islamists to send a political message. The military used them to suggest that the Muslim Brotherhood were incapable of keeping order, while the Brotherhood asserted them as further evidence that the men and women should be kept segregated in public.

With Sisi's coup and the end of Brotherhood rule, things still did not improve. The issue of women's rights and their status in society was effectively restored to the position it occupied under Hosni Mubarak. This was another step in the wrong direction; gender equality became once more a topic which could be instrumentalised in accordance with political interests, and not a question of citizenship and human rights.

Despite these challenges, Egyptian women are without doubt more fortunate than their Syrian sisters. According to statistics published by the Syrian Network for Human Rights in a report released to coincide with the 2013 International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, 11,000 women have been killed since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. There have been 7,500 cases of sexual violence committed by the regime within detention centres and during raids, with 400 committed against individuals less than eighteen years old.



Photography of actress Lamyia Abi Azar smoking a cigarette while the police uses tear gas against the protesters during the 2016 garbage protests in Beirut.  
© Ibrahim Dirani

There are some 2.1 million displaced women within Syria and 1.1 million Syrian women who are refugees outside its borders.<sup>10</sup> According to the UNHCR 145,000 Syrian women are responsible for providing for their families in refugee camps and centres in Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan, amid very challenging living conditions.<sup>11</sup> Hopes were similarly dashed in Yemen, despite the high levels of women participating in demonstrations shortly before the ouster of President Saleh, the situation quickly deteriorated into civil war, destroying women's hopes of change.

It is clear that whilst women were at the forefront of the revolutions calling for freedom, justice and dignity, they have become a footnote in what followed, as revolutions in Syria, Yemen and Libya turned into civil wars or counter-revolutions.<sup>12</sup> Over this period, women have gone from being revolutionaries to objects of shame, while their bodies have become part of the battlefield itself, a means to control political action and one of the weapons deployed in the battle for power between fundamentalist Islamist groups and repressive regimes.

This appears to validate Fatima Mernissi's observation prior to the Egyptian revolution:

*'Any ruler facing a crisis, who has to deal with the discontent of a starving population or a popular uprising, will immediately implement two measures which are always at the forefront of any corrective strategy: the destruction of alcoholic beverages and preventing women from leaving the house or taking public transport used by men.'*<sup>13</sup>

The problem encountered by women involved with the revolutions was that the systems of power in the Arab world were deeply rooted, immovable, distributed among institutions of male hegemony and culture, and

based around a patriarchal nationalism. When these came under attack, the entire repressive apparatus and its age-old cultural legacy was deployed for the sole purpose of preserving the status quo. It seems that the feminist movement was genuinely unprepared for how durable this culture and cultural legacy would be. Its treatment of women as something to be manipulated and directed according to the whims and desires of male hegemony was not something which could be deconstructed quickly.

## What Now for Arab Feminism? Challenges and Opportunities

According to Islamist writings, one of the more praiseworthy outcomes of the Arab revolutions was that they weakened the influence of the 'Westernising' feminist movement, a term used by fundamentalist Islamists to discredit the Arab feminist movement as simply an echo of Western discourse.

However, the feminist movement is often portrayed as the biggest loser of the Arab Spring. This belief is based first and foremost on the experiences of women at the forefront of revolutions across the Arab world, where Islamist movements have extended their influence to largely eclipse those of the popular uprisings, most notably in Libya and Syria. The civic and democratic values that dominated the early stages of uprisings have given way to traditional, Islamist and other counter-revolutionary forces, as seen in Yemen and Egypt.

The persistent criticisms by Islamists of secularist Islamic movements, which have been

dismissed as Western and populated by lackeys of the West have been paired with efforts to equate the feminist movement with corrupt regimes. This is premised on the idea of a top-down, Western model embodied in the concept of 'the First Lady' as patron of 'Westernising' feminism.<sup>14</sup>

This anti-feminist position was not however openly stated at the outset of the revolution. Salafist movements were happy to use women as a pretext for mobilisation and they supported a number of problematic actions, with female supporters of their cause taking part in demonstrations calling for regime change in Egypt, Yemen and Tunisia. Once the regimes had fallen though, it became clear that this participation was merely the exploitation of women to propagate Salafist and Islamist thought. The emergence and institutionalisation of the 'proselytising woman' stood in opposition to secular feminists.<sup>15</sup>

In her study 'Circles of Fear: Tunisian women and Salafism' Dr. Amal Qarami from the University of Manouba in Tunisia examined Salafist propagation of a misogynist culture. She characterises the Salafist program as an extremist discourse which seeks to return women to the domestic sphere and turn literalist readings of the *Qur'anic* text into laws. This position, she argues, is utterly untethered from real life and any understanding of what is referred to as 'the intentions of religious law'. What was new were the violent methods employed by young Salafists to impose their worldview.

The most pressing danger currently facing feminist and progressive movements is arguably that the discourse of fundamentalist intimidation directed at women and their rights has been transformed from a problematic intellectual position into a series of actions

designed to effect this vision on the ground. This has created a state of trauma in the ranks of movements for social justice. In areas under the control of Daesh women can only appear in public entirely covered in black and cannot mix with the opposite sex. The revival of practices such as taking captured women as slaves, trading in female slaves, and the use of rape as a punishment in times of war is horrifying. This is fundamentalist attitudes towards women taken to their most extreme conclusion.

Whilst openly terrorist Islamist groups like Daesh strike fear in the hearts of Western onlookers, mainstream 'moderate' Islamist movements such as the Tunisian Nahda movement<sup>16</sup> and the Muslim Brotherhood propagate a discourse of 'soft repression' towards women. The contradictions between word and deed by these groups are evident. In her article 'Women in the Discourse of the Nahda Movement', Tunisian researcher Raja Bensalama points to the contradictory approach inherent in Nahda's literature towards women's political and social rights. She focuses specifically on the views of Rashed Al Ghanousi and other luminaries of the movement, concluding that there has been no real change in the Nahda movement's thinking on gender equality – only opportunism.<sup>17</sup>

It is important here to highlight a point of crucial significance in the Tunisian experience, which actually resulted in the Nahda movement being forced to revise its politics somewhat. The presence of a courageous liberationist feminist discourse and the strength feminist groups in the country which allies with marginal social movements like those representing the workers, and the existence of space for liberal culture and human rights, created an excellent opportunity to leverage genuine political influence. This forced the Nahda Movement to





Battle between women and the Lebanese authorities during the 2016 garbage demonstration in Beirut  
© Marwan Tahtah

revise its approach to women.

The outcome of the Arab revolutions, which saw the collapse of the Arab Spring and in some countries a descent into medieval barbarism towards women, dealt a blow to the feminist movement. Feminists who had made great strides at the theoretical and intellectual level, and activists who thought they had moved past basic practical issues such as the right to employment and education, found themselves again fighting the battles that had confronted the feminist movement in its infancy. The issue of the *hijab* – a battle that Egyptian feminist Hoda al-Shaarawi had fought over a century before – again had to be debated. Questions such as women's right to political representation, first raised by the pioneers of the Arab Renaissance such as Sheikh Tantawi and first Egyptian male feminist Qassem Amin, were also raised as though they were not settled matters.

However, it might be proposed that this return to basic principles, although frustrating, can be seen as a watershed moment. All progressive movements concerned with citizenship, and not just those focused on women's rights, equality and liberation from their status as objects have been forced to contemplate the relationship between social justice and national security. The institutionalisation of a comprehensively equal and progressive concept of citizenship and the total removal of religion from the public sphere is a debate which is now on the table. This has become possible because 'the issue of women' has become a tool for generating polarisation by backward forces to undermine security and stability in societies touched by the Arab Spring.

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

- 1 Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An historical and theological enquiry*; translated by Mary Jo Lakeland, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, see also Fatima Mernissi, *The veil and the male elite: a feminist interpretation of women's rights in Islam*; translated by Mary Jo Lakeland, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Inc., 1991.
- 2 Leila Ahmad, *Women and Gender in Islam*, Yale University Press, 1992.
- 3 Saba Mahmoud, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton University Press; 2005.
- 4 See Rita Farag (Ed.), *Women in the Arab World and the Challenges of Political Islam* (Arabic), The Mesbar Studies and Research Center, Dubai, 2013.

- 5 Niklas Albin Svensson, 'The Key Role of Women in the Egyptian Revolution', in *Defence of Marxism*. Retrieved 25 June 2015: [www.marxist.com/key-role-of-women-in-egyptian-revolution.htm](http://www.marxist.com/key-role-of-women-in-egyptian-revolution.htm).
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- 7 'Stages of the Development of Female Representation in the Egyptian Parliament' (Arabic) in *Agora*, October 8, 2015 (Last viewed November 6, 2016): <https://goo.gl/kWm7kf>.
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- 9 The Egyptian Center for Human Rights, *Egyptian Women and the Muslim Brotherhood: Excessive Use of Force and Mass Violations* (Arabic), September 1, 2013 (Last viewed November 6, 2016): <https://goo.gl/nZEvCA>.
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- 11 UNHCR, *Syrian Women Fight for Survival as They Head Families Alone*, July 8, 2014: <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2014/7/53bb77049/syrian-refugee-women-fight-survival-head-families-alone.html>
- 12 not to mention Iraq, which has been hell itself for over a decade.
- 13 Fatima Mernissi, *The Fear of Modernity: Islam and Democracy* (Arabic), Dar Al Jundi, Damascus, 2014.
- 14 See for example the work of Al Haitham Zaafan, an Egyptian Islamist Salafist thinker who writes on feminism and Westernization: 'The Feminist Movement and the Weakening of Islamic Societies: A Case Study of Egyptian Society' (Arabic), in *Al Bayan Magazine*, 2006; 'Western Funding and Buying Thought in the Arab World' (Arabic), *Al Bayan Magazine*, 2011. For more on the weakening effect of the Arab revolutions on the feminist movement see: 'Syrian Women and the Failure of the Feminist Movement' (Arabic) at *Al Moslim*, February 2, 2016 (Last viewed November 9, 2016): <http://www.almoslim.net/node/251086>.
- 15 See, 'Women of the Islamist Movement and their Entry into Politics: A Case Study of Salafist and Brotherhood Women' (Arabic) at *Islamist Movements*, June 13, 2016 (Last viewed November 9, 2016): <http://www.islamist-movements.com/2780>.
- 16 The Nahda Movement is a moderate Islamic political party in Tunisia. In the wake of the 2011 Tunisian revolution and collapse of the government of Ben Ali, the Ennahdha Movement Party was formed. In the 2011 Tunisian Constituent Assembly election, it won a plurality of 37% of the popular vote and formed a government.
- 17 Raja Bensalama, 'Women in the Discourse of the Nahda Movement' (Arabic), in Rita Farag (Ed.), *Women in the Arab World and the Challenges of Political Islam*, The Mesbar Studies and Research Center, Dubai, 2013.



# Life in Exile: New Roles and New Challenges for Syrian Women

## Alisha Molter talks to Majd Chourbaji

*'Many women are here in Bekaa without men, only with their children; four on average, but I know mothers with up to 12 children. Those women are now the main bread winners.'*

These are the words of Syrian activist Majd Chourbaji, director of the human rights organisation *Basamat*, as she explains the situation of women in Lebanon's central Bekaa valley. Bekaa is a region close to the Syrian border which hosts around 360.000 refugees from Syria who live in 'informal tented settlements' or private houses. Currently around one in five refugee households in Lebanon are headed by women, their husbands having died or gone missing. Many are fighting in Syria or have left their families to embark on the perilous journey over the Mediterranean.

Whether they are accompanied by men or not, life in exile forces women to take new roles and responsibilities. There is an effect on gender relations; whilst women are assuming responsibilities outside the house and increasingly making decisions regarding income and expenditures, those men who remain with their families in exile are losing their roles as breadwinners and decision-makers. This shift should not be misunderstood as an exchange of roles, however. Women continue to shoulder the majority of household chores, and therefore are often under a double pressure, continuing to do the domestic work while assuming the role of providing for the family.

How do these women manage the complex demands of life under exile in Lebanon? How do they survive? What does this daily struggle look like, and what are their biggest concerns?

## How Legal Precarity Harms Women

*'We could describe Lebanon as a piece of land where they put you and say: "Yalla, deal with it yourself." - Majd Chourbaji*

Precarity of life affects all Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Provisions are scarce, and due to the decentralised nature of the refugee camps, many refugees might not be reached by international aid. International support exists mostly on paper, as only a share of pledges made to assist refugees have materialised.<sup>1</sup>

On top of this, the Lebanese government no longer allows the United Nations to register Syrians as refugees. This is possibly because Lebanon never signed the UN convention on refugees.<sup>2</sup> The Lebanese state obliges all Syrians over the age of fifteen to have a valid residency agreement, but this goes hand in hand with considerable costs and difficult conditions. The residency costs 200 Dollar per year/person, and it is also necessary to have a Lebanese sponsor or a properly registered lease agreement. Even if one is able to fulfil these conditions, valid residency does not automatically entitle the holder to obtain a work permit.

This renders all Syrians vulnerable, but affects men and women in different ways. Men are more likely to get stopped and subsequently arrested at checkpoints than women are. Therefore, as most families cannot afford to pay for proper papers for all members, if they have to choose, priority for the residency permit is usually given to the men of the family. Women find it easier to slip into Lebanon's illegality, but this makes them more vulnerable to harassment.

The same holds true for those who are trafficked across the Mediterranean. If a family

can gather the 2000 Dollar often demanded for the trip, it is usually a male member of the family who will go. This is because they are considered less vulnerable to harassment on the journey, and therefore have the greatest chance of arriving safely in a European country. Therefore, restrictions imposed by states who receive refugees on family reunification mostly affect the women and children who are left behind by their husbands and fathers.

## Financial Troubles, Family Life and Forced Marriage

Families' living conditions within the refugee households depend obviously on the resources they have. Majd explains,

*'the women who are living in houses are in a better situation than those living in settlements. Still, often two families are sharing one apartment in order to be able to pay the rent. At the moment, refugees even need to pay for the tents in a tented settlement. The tents cost about 100 Dollar per month- if they live in houses it is even more. In addition to that, they then need to calculate the water and electricity bills, eventually medicine, and food for a five person household.'*

Another concern for families is the schooling of their children. Many Syrian children do not attend school as a result of the war, with the risk now being that a whole generation will grow up without even basic education. One of the worries around this for many families is the potential that such a lack of opportunity creates for religious and political radicalisation. Using international aid, many Lebanese public schools have been refurbished and renovated over the past years and are running second or even third shifts for children to attend. These are not consistent – sometimes the Lebanese curriculum is taught, sometimes the Syrian curriculum. Yet even the minimal fees of these schools are an obstacle to many families placing their children in the classes, as are the expenses of and access to transportation to get them there. For those women who can afford to get their children into higher education, the question is what will happen next. A combination of legal insecurity and poverty increased the risk that women will experience sexual violence or forced marriage. On top of that, rumours of 'disappeared' women around the settlements curb the freedom of movement of young women. Even though over the past years only one case of a woman going missing in Lebanon's north could be confirmed, the fear that this threat creates is enough to keep parents from having their daughters participate in schooling or other educational activities,

even where available.

Some women are pushed to marry - either by these circumstances or by their parents - in order to get out of this miserable situation. Without proper papers, they can only get married in front of a Sheikh; their inability to officially register the marriage means it does not have any legal recognition and therefore no protection for the woman. To marry is often not felt to be a desirable choice for women themselves, but they feel compelled to give in to men's demands. As Majd Chourbaji explains, *'some women get married to Lebanese or Syrian men so that they take care of them. But some get divorced after 20 days and the men will marry another, which is a form of hidden prostitution.'*

Majd also highlights the problem of child marriage. According to Lebanese law, 12 years is the minimum age for a girl to marry. Child marriages were not uncommon in Syria, especially in the rural areas. Yet now it is rather the vulnerability of families in exile than customary practice that leads to these arrangements. There are also cases of forced marriage, with fathers marrying off their daughters for money. Majd states

*'there was a case of a 19-year-old girl and her father married her to a 50-year-old guy from Aleppo. The father took 1000 Dollar, so he was just selling his daughter to the guy. Of course they haven't registered officially their marriage. After a month, she couldn't respond to his sexual demands and she wanted to get divorced and got divorced, all unofficially. All this explains why people here are taking the risk to cross the Mediterranean hoping for a better life. They cannot afford the life here anymore. People are borrowing 2000 Dollar to make this trip possible.'*

## The Need for Protection Mechanisms

State institutions such as the police, whose mandate it is to protect people, are deeply distrusted by women, making them reluctant to report harassment or abuse. In some cases, Majd says, women in Lebanon are afraid to go to the police station because they fear harassment by the police themselves.

*'There is a lack in the legislation but at the same time everybody knows that even the existing laws are not being enforced. In Lebanon the police officers ask sometimes for your phone number when you are leaving the Police station, not to call you on the case, but in private. Still, we always ask the women to demand their rights even though there might be no direct and immediate benefit for them.'*

The presence of men within refugee



Alisha Molter is a MA graduate of programmes in both International and European Governance (University of Münster) and Management Des Institutions Culturelles (Sciences Po Lille). She interned with Heinrich Böll Stiftung in Beirut, where she coordinated the Parliament Simulation 'More Than A Talkshop'. Since 2015, Alisha has worked as a consultant for Heinrich Böll Stiftung's Middle East Office. She frequently writes articles on regional developments and specializes in cultural and refugee affairs.



Majd Chourbaji is a Syrian activist from Darayya. During the Syrian uprising, Majd organized sit-ins and demonstrations. She was arrested and subjected to police brutality. Her continued surveillance by Syrian security forces after her release led her to escape into Lebanon. Since 2012, Majd has lived in Bekaa, where first she worked with 'Women Now for Development' and then founded the organisation *Basamat*. In 2015, she received the US State Department's International Women of Courage Award.

households not necessarily change women's situation for the better. Some men stay at home to avoid checkpoints and many do not have jobs. The sense of disempowerment this creates for men is exacerbated by their wives increasing adoption of traditionally male responsibilities as breadwinners. This often goes hand in hand with domestic violence as men who are forced to stay at home are reluctant to embrace new responsibilities within the home and feel emasculated. Majd observes that in the camps *'there is more domestic violence due to the fact that women are working and men are not. The men are abusing the women because they feel depressed as they have nothing to do in their life.'*



## Emancipation? No Turning Back

Despite these challenges, some women experience the new roles forced upon them by exile and war as an emancipatory step. As different human rights activists have observed, women have had to leave their communities, but these communities have been themselves a source of disempowerment. Their new lives provide them with increased freedom to do things they may not have been either able or expected to do before.

However, human rights activists also see a strong link between the perception of the new role as an emancipation and the social class a woman belongs to. Lubna Alkanawati, a human rights activist in Turkey, suggests that *'the middle class for example, and the class that is considered as "intellectual" lives in freedom, regardless of the country they are living in, whether it is Turkey or Lebanon.'* She exhorts us not to forget

*'the "populist" classes that have become more closed and couldn't get out of their environment and traditions. Many articles and researches were carried out on women who took off their scarves. But come and see those who became more extreme. The vast majority are still living in a "small Syria" inside Turkey, Lebanon and even Europe. This majority is not active, neither politically nor socially. Syrian classes have been divided as there is no land to unite them anymore. Syria was this land.'*

Majd Chourbaji states that it might not be a revolutionary moment for women, for some the experience of exile will have changed their lifestyle forever. *'Many women are saying that they will not go back to the point of departure and will not accept to stay at home for example. Even though they feel the whole burden on them, they like their new role and do not want to go back to the role they had before.'*

1 12.1 billion Dollar have been pledged during the Donor Conference in London in February 2016. Referring to a report by concern worldwide in May 2016, only 1.2 billion Dollar have been transferred <http://www.concernusa.org/press/report-months-after-pledges-most-donor-nations-fail-to-make-good-as-syrians-suffer/>.

2 For more information, please compare the Law Library of Congress <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/refugee-law/lebanon.php>.

# Besieged but Unbroken

## An interview with Lubna Alkanawati

*They survive shelling and barrel bombs from the Syrian government, and airstrikes from Russia. Some have been living under siege since 2012, with little food and potable water and hardly any medicine or electricity. Almost all parties involved with the conflict in Syria use hunger as a weapon against them, though none as systematically as the Syrian regime. This is everyday life under siege for the remaining residents of many Syrian cities.*

Even before Aleppo came under siege in July 2016, the non-governmental organisation Siege Watch established the number of people living under siege in Syria at one million. The regime was implicated in 99 percent of the sieges, and was the exclusive besieging party in 85 percent. Hundreds of citizens have died through starvation in the country, all in areas outside regime control. Those who feel the impact of siege the most profoundly are those whose are also physically the most vulnerable: children and the elderly. Ignoring international humanitarian law, the regime uses hunger as a weapon, starving cities and villages into surrender while continuing to shell the areas.

The areas surrounding Damascus have been particularly affected by this strategy of using sieges against civilian populations. This interview with Lubna Alkanawati of the organisation Women Now for Development is maybe the most dramatic example of the regime's brutality.

Darayya, which has often been held up as a positive example of how women can be included in local decision making in Syria, suffered under siege as the world looked on. Well known for its peaceful resistance and the fact that none of the extremist groups ever was able to establish itself here, Darayya was besieged beginning in 2012. As of January 2016, it became difficult for Women Now to continue supporting activities in the area. In April 2016 the organisation urgently appealed for help, saying aid could no longer be delivered due to the actions of the regime. In summer, crops planted by the people of Darayya were burned as the first aid convoy reached the town – a delivery that felt to many as if a death knell had finally tolled for the suburb because it was followed by enhanced and relentless bombardments by the regime through which it sought to hinder the distribution of aid, and it at this time it also destroyed the last hospital with incendiary ammunition. In light of the army's notorious 4th division threatening to capture the place, Darayya's local council finally agreed to a deal to transfer all its remaining citizens to other locations.

Lubna Alkanawati is a graphic designer and women's rights activist. She participated in the very early stages of the Syrian revolution in demonstrations for dignity and justice. She later led efforts for humanitarian aid in besieged areas. Observing the deteriorating conditions for women during the war, she dedicated herself to women's empowerment projects with 'Women Now for Development', first as local Director and then as a Programme Manager in Gaziantep, Turkey. She is coordinating the organisation's projects inside Syria and focuses on the development of women's participation in local decision making.



Heinrich Böll Stiftung Middle East talked on several occasions to Lubna Alkanawati. Lubna is a Syrian activist who escaped the siege in Eastern Ghouta in 2014. Through a route in the north of Syria she made it to Gaziantep in Turkey. She works with Women Now to coordinate their activities inside Syria. In areas outside the regime's control, where local militias are in charge, the security situation is the main challenge for Women Now because these areas have been subject to constant shelling and starvation through sieges.

Perspectives: Aerial bombardments of residential areas are indiscriminate attacks against civilians, no matter whether men, women or children ...

Lubna Alkanawati (LAK): Indeed, the major needs are more or less related to the security situation affecting the families in general and the women in particular. It affects their freedom of movement from area to another. When an area is being subject to shelling, women and children are being evacuated first. They are usually sent to neighbouring areas depending on the intensity of the bombardment.

Men are usually involved in the military work and in some cases they stay in order not to lose their properties, hoping that they can get their families back after the situation gets calmer but women, elderly and children are being pushed to leave.

To be safe from the bombs in that moment does not mean, however, that they are personally safe because fleeing women are being subject to many abuses and are thus particularly vulnerable. If it is not possible to evacuate the area, however, women are often subject to a (male) head of household's decision, some of which say the whole family should be together and in case the house is hit by a barrel bomb, die altogether.

Last but not least, women have different needs, which under conditions of war make life more difficult for them.

Perspectives: What are these needs?

LAK: First of all women need a safe, decent and well served place to stay at. Clean water, clean bathrooms, hygiene kits, women's sanitary napkins, cleaning products - and since they are the ones to provide for the children as well: diapers for children, baby milk... They do not take such items along when fleeing in such circumstances and they are quickly consumable and always needed.

The places where people are fleeing to are usually not well equipped. There are no or shared toilets, there's a water shortage... Women's needs are different from men's needs. Men can go to the bathroom wherever they like!

Inside Syria, everyday basic services are not reliably available. Most of the areas witness severe electricity and water cuts, there are hardly any means of communication - basic services are absent. All this has an impact on women's day to day life. It is indeed disastrous. Women are the 'alternative' to these services: cooking, washing, and doing all the housework is on the women's shoulders anyway, and this burden is being doubled when water or electricity are cut and fuel is not available. Maybe in the south or the north there are generators but in the besieged areas for instance this is not the case.

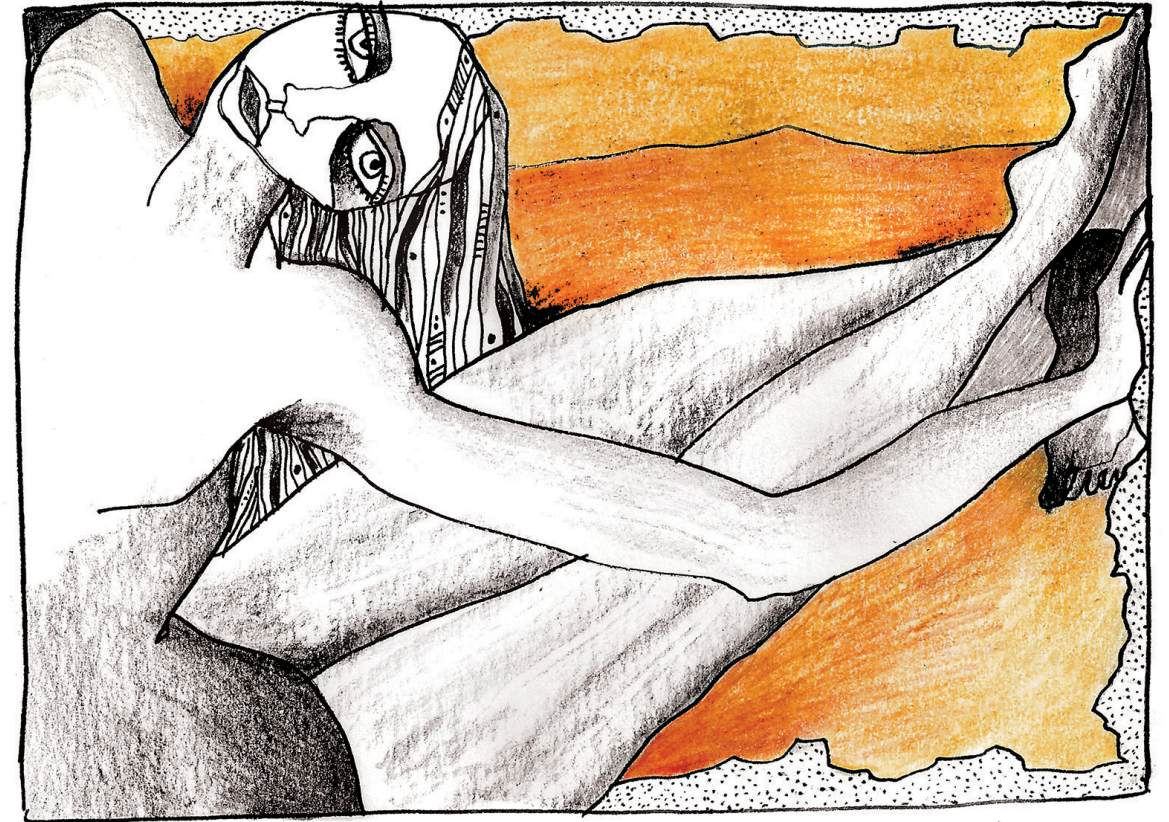
Women therefore have to wash the clothes by hand because there is no electricity to run the washing machine. Cooking is done using firewood, and it is the same for taking a bath where they have to heat the water, and it is the same for baking bread as there are no bakeries. Women have to walk everywhere as there is no transportation.

The women's role inside the family is in fact a very high responsibility. Women became the pillar of the family. Even more than before, the family cannot be coherent without the mother. Here we are just talking about the women's role inside the family.

Perspectives: How about medical needs? Most of Syria's hospitals have been destroyed; the last paediatrician in the opposition part of Aleppo and the last gynecologist in Ghouta were killed by shellfire earlier this year ...

LAK: Indeed. We still have social obstacles and 'our women' are quite shy. Even if it is religiously all right and sanctioned by the Sharia, there are still many obstacles that prevent women from talking about their issues. Things become much easier when there are female workers and representatives with which women feel comfortable sharing their private issues.

In Darayya, for example, we have a female team. I want to mention the Darayya's women's campaign and the women's requests: Sanitary napkins, hygienic liquid for women, contraception pills are needed, food supplements and vitamins for women, especially the pregnant women and those who now are not able to feed their newborns because they don't have milk. There should be baby kits with milk powder, diapers and nursing bottles, and women also ask for deodorant, tooth brushes, scabies shampoo and



hair removal products. If there were no women supervising and relating the woman-related needs, these could not have been included.

Especially in areas under siege, survival has in some areas only been possible because there are some tunnels, or ways to bring in marginal supplies through smuggling. But these routes are controlled by the military leadership in the besieged area, and women would individually be shy to communicate their needs, even though in the end they are not private but in the interest of the entire society.

These are very important details that show us that women should be put in decision making positions, locally but also higher.

**Perspectives:** You mentioned on another occasion that domestic violence and violence against women was a problem – are there legal means by which women can claim their rights in areas outside regime control?

LAK: There are ways, and especially the community inside Syria is still playing a protective role towards women. But if the women's rights have been violated by the protectors themselves, here is the problem. Women Now opened an office for legal counselling and most of the cases we had then in 2013 fall under the family law of civil documentation. The person in charge of this centre is a female lawyer who was liaising with the Sharia court in the area. These bodies might play a mediatory role – but they are running under the supervision of the militias/factions.

Some men are getting married to other woman after they send their wives and children to Turkey. And they are living their lives normally while women are married and have their children with them. They cannot get married and they do not know anything about their status actually. Even if they wanted to get divorced the men are not accepting!

Harassment cases are not being received although we know that they are very common. The community is still trying to protect perpetrators... So also the domestic violence cases are not being listened to. And there is no way to get your rights back in such cases. Women rely on 'men's morals' when it comes to their rights as there is no law to protect them at the end.

Coming back to the Sharia courts inside: If the case is not taken by one court, the plaintiff can take it to another. Usually men against whom a suit was filed try not to have their case reaching al-Nusra courts as they are the strictest ones; the men know that there is no kidding anymore.

**Perspectives:** How do you see women's rights and emancipation in this difficult situation?

LAK: One of the achievements of the Syrian revolution is that women had the opportunity to be in decision-making positions at the local level. And of course their roles have changed. Syrian women are aware of this change and the importance of the new roles they are playing.

What differs for women inside Syria and those now abroad is that outside Syria you have more freedom to speak or act freely and to be visible as female, while in Syria, there are millions of guns to be faced. Outside Syria you do not have to face this military authority and there is no war so you can easily highlight your work through media for example. Look how many Syrian women were awarded for their civil work over the past five years.

Acknowledging the contributions women have made and supporting them to reach decision making positions is still a challenge for Syrian society, and of course the de facto authority – the militia groups. Syrian women have tried to play a role in the Free Syrian Army but the Islamisation of the revolution and the emergence of jihadi movements weakened these roles. We still have hope though in the civil society movements, and even in civil revolutionary bodies such as the Local Administrative Councils.

## Drinking, Dancing and Distrust: A Woman's Life in Damascus

Alisha Molter

A friend recently observed that there are a lot of young women in the cafes and bars of Damascus; many more than before war had broken out in Syria. These girls, my friend said, were wearing more makeup than before, which she suggested was possibly a sign of the high competition over those few men who remained in Damascus. To learn more about this phenomenon I spoke in depth with Lamia Ayoubi<sup>1</sup>, a young Syrian woman living in Damascus who frequently travels to Beirut.

**Alisha Molter (AM):** How do you pass your days in Damascus?

Lamia Ayoubi (LA): I have a good job, I work from 9 to 5, and after that I meet friends in cafes or at home. With some friends we started a film club. We used to do it at home, or sometimes in a café, but then the café owner got arrested, so we prefer not to do it there anymore.

What changed for me is that I am involved in a lot of charity work now. And I drink a lot more alcohol than before, because there is nothing else to do. We have now a lot of Russian brands, really strong stuff that gives you headache afterwards. I didn't change anything in my outfits, everything like before. But for going out, we all changed our behaviour and do not go out late anymore. Even the weddings and parties start earlier now. Weddings start at 2 pm and finish at 8 pm. Parties finish at 10 or 11 pm at latest.

What is an obvious change in Damascus is that you see a lot of women working in the cafes. You see now even veiled women serving men, something completely unusual in Syria.

**AM:** Did your circle of friends change due to the war?

LA: Yes, all relations changed completely. I have new friends now. I used to be always the youngest one among my friends. Now, my close friends have left and I have some friends who are five years younger than me. But to be honest, they are the reason I was staying so long in Damascus. I even made friends with people I only knew from before. Now that everyone else left, I became friends with them (laughs). I went to a girls' school and now I started seeing girls from my 7th and 8th grade.

**AM:** Do you live in your own apartment or with your parents? Are they more protective since the war started?

LA: I live in an apartment in central Damascus with my dad. There are a lot of checkpoints close to our house that I need to pass daily more than once. My dad is definitely more protective than before. But I can understand his



Alisha Molter is a MA graduate of programmes in both International and European Governance (University of Münster) and Management Des Institutions Culturelles (Sciences Po Lille). She interned with Heinrich Böll Stiftung in Beirut, where she coordinated the Parliament Simulation 'More Than A Talkshop'. Since 2015, Alisha has worked as a consultant for Heinrich Böll Stiftung's Middle East Office. She frequently writes articles on regional developments and specializes in cultural and refugee affairs.





Women doing graffiti on Beirut walls during the 2016 garbage demonstration in Beirut  
© Marwan Tahtah

reaction and I allow him to be more protective. Before the war, I was always arguing with him for letting me stay out late and these things, and I considered moving out and finding my own apartment. Since two years now, I am home by 10 pm every evening at latest because it is not safe outside, and I feel how good it is that someone cares if I come home in the evenings or not... It doesn't feel safe to stay alone. I am always afraid to be detained, every second.

AM: With all the terrible news from Syria, it is difficult to imagine parties. Could you describe a party you recently went to?

LA: Yes, there are parties... with my friends we have gatherings at home. When you go to a gathering, everyone is silent in the beginning. Everyone is afraid to say something wrong; we don't trust people in political views and avoid talking about it. We are fed up talking about politics and the war. So everyone is silent. Then, they start drinking alcohol and people are talking.

In Damascus, the day for going out is Thursday, not Friday, and last week I went to a friend's place. We were six girls and two guys on a terrace. We were sitting there and drinking and talking. Most of the time we have no electricity, so we have the 'romance killer' (laughs). That's how we describe the LED-lamp with that really white light that works without electricity. We don't dance a lot because most of the time there is no electricity. Sometimes we can put music over those small speakers you can charge beforehand.

AM: Did you dance recently?

LA: There are some clubs for dancing. I don't like to go there because they play regime music and people chant for the President and Hezbollah. I go there maybe every three months for dancing. Sometimes, when I am really drunk I even chant for the President and Nasrallah and I dance over the tables and I don't care! Sometimes, I just continue dancing to the regime songs to protect myself. If I stopped, it would be too visible that I danced the whole evening and just stopped dancing on that song.

AM: Are you in love?

LA: Mhh, yes, I think so.

AM: How free are people in their marriage choice?

LA: We are definitely not free in our choice. Marriage depends on how you live and where you come from. I got a lot of marriage offers before, even though I had a boyfriend. And when we broke up, there were immediately all the neighbours asking... (trails off)

AM: How did you meet? How do women find a husband these days in Damascus?

LA: With my new boyfriend, we started dating in Beirut and he lives there. Nobody knows about us. My friends do know but my parents believe he is just a friend. I know that for most of the girls it is really important in Damascus now to find a husband. People use Facebook and Whatsapp to meet and date. I never tried but I understand that people use online dating nowadays. There are no other opportunities. For me it is different – I have a boyfriend and I can travel outside Syria.

I have a friend who met her husband via Facebook. They decided to marry and only afterwards they physically met for ten days and then got married. Of course they were talking a lot before. For the girls in Syria it really matters now to get married to a guy who lives outside the country. They don't even look at those who are still here – because the guys who are still in Damascus are mostly pro-regime.

But also there is a big age difference. All the men in the age of military service have left. I have some friends who married really young girls, like 17. And I know some guys above 42, who are not obliged to go to military service any more, and they get married to younger women. My friend who is 30 just married a guy of 42. All the others have already left.

<sup>1</sup> Due to the sensitive content of the interview, this is a pseudonym chosen by the interviewee.

# Whose Voice Counts? Women Activists' Participation in the Syrian Peace Process

Rami Araban

I still remember the joy of a woman in my neighbourhood when she learned of another woman's group passionately discussing news of the revolution in morning sessions. The morning session was the only occasion on which the women would come together. A sixty year-old woman was enumerating the female opposition figures in Syria, a place which had kept women silent for nearly four decades. Despite all she had seen during her long years, the political activist in her heart had not died.

From the very outset of the Syrian revolution, and even before that moment during the preparations which preceded it, women were deeply involved in planning and coordinating revolutionary activities in the country. As the revolution gathered pace, the whole world heard women's voices sing out alongside those of the men, equally present in number at demonstrations in city centres and rural villages to denounce the regime.<sup>1</sup> Women's participation (a phrase that here does not seem to do their activities justice) was the true embodiment of the axiom that 'women are half of society'. From coordination, logistics and technical support, all the way through to leading demonstrations as we saw in Homs and other regions of Syria, women's role was crucial to the revolution.

The regime's mechanism of repression also did not spare women; evidence of how seriously it took the role they played in mobilising communities. The early videos which emerged of what appeared to be a member of the intelligence services specifically targeting a female demonstrator in Damascus shocked the world in 2011.<sup>2</sup> The regime targeted female activists for arrest and detention for many reasons; sometimes this was to do with their activities, but at other times it was a way of pressuring their families into 'voluntarily'

handing over their men to agencies of the state.

It is easy to criticise the regime for repressing women and denying them their most basic rights, mainly because of the obviousness and crudity of its methods. However, what is much harder for activists to face is the reality that their own demands for freedom, rights and dignity have not been applied to all members of society evenly, even within the Syrian revolutionary movement itself. This is especially the case when it comes to the inclusion of women.

## Local Councils

In 2011, local councils were established following the liberation of the uprising areas. These were supposed to have been the start of a new participatory electoral model on the regional level, aimed at improving democratic processes in Syria. However, these soon turned into 'statelets' run by groups that in most of the cases either elected themselves into office or were hailed by locals as saviours according to the size of the 'sacrifice' they had made for the revolution, without regard to their proficiency or professionalism as democratic representatives. Women activists who had been key figures in the revolution did not succeed in making it into the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs). For example, Razan Zeitouneh, who was one of the founders of the LCCs, was excluded from the change process because she was abducted by those who should have been building on her and her group's distinguished work in the liberated areas.

With few exceptions these local councils were only new in terms of their social make-up and not the services they provided, which simply privileged a different group of power brokers. However this time, there were not any women among them. Rather, female

activists began to fall victim to what we might term 'revolutionary persecution' following the formation of regional commands that were totalitarian and exclusionary, and whose first victims were women. Syrian activists see that the takeover of these local administrations by those traditional power seekers – whom, incidentally, we do not deny contributed to the revolution – has had a negative impact on women's representation. This further compounds the historically dominant role played by men in the institutions of the state.

The revolution's transition into armed struggle gave militants a prerogative over civil political groups. With the exception of a few special cases involving female fighters for the Free Syrian Army in East Aleppo, and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in areas controlled by the Kurds, women were absent from the armed struggle. Logistical support in all its forms was the most important aspect of this new phase. As fighting amongst groups proliferated, checkpoints stopping people (with or without cause) in search of 'the enemy' multiplied. The regime also started to use siege and starvation as weapons of attrition. Female doctors, paramedics and reporters were on the front lines against the regime, to which non-violent activists constituted a more valuable target than the fighters who faced them. The regime, eager to promote its narrative of the revolution as led by militant Islamists, tried to sideline and eliminate charismatic civic leaders of the opposition.

## Female Aid Networks

Aid workers running projects providing assistance to besieged areas tell stories of Syrian women bringing food into blockaded zones in the countryside around Damascus, risking their

lives each time they passed regime checkpoints. The soldiers there would only allow women to bring in enough provisions to last their families a day or two, but these women were prepared to go back and forth repeatedly, risking arousing suspicion just so they could feed those under siege. No close observer can ignore the role played by Syrian mothers in neighbouring countries who shoulder the burden of helping their families find work, in addition to their involvement in volunteer work and the social and humanitarian activities that are run for the benefit of refugees.

Women have never been absent from revolutionary work either in Syria or abroad, but MD, an activist who coordinates social aid work in the Damascus countryside, says that another setback for women has been the growing presence of Islamist forces:

'The men in our team inside the besieged areas make alarming concessions around the core values of the revolution and turn their back on a lot of basic principles just so the work can go on or, in other cases, so they can have any presence at all. If that's the case with the men, imagine what it's like with the women.'

It can be seen from these examples that revolutionary activities have split those involved in two groups. There are popular forces active on the ground, who are occasionally in contact with elites located outside the region (mostly for funding reasons), and then there is an activist elite which is largely denied space to operate within Syria. There is no clear way of elevating the Syrian revolution and revolutionary activities, with women's participation at the centre, to the levels desired by the opposition movement. This split has had a profound effect on the progress and structure of revolutionary work. Initiatives that have attempted to bring together women's efforts and representation

Rami Araban works as a Programme Manager on Syria and Iraq at the Heinrich Böll Stiftung Middle East Office in Beirut. He previously worked for Norwegian Refugee Council in Lebanon in a number of different roles; first as a Programme Coordinator in the Legal Counselling Programme for refugees, and later as a consultant with the partnership team providing support to local humanitarian organisations in Syria. A graduate of physics and former high school teacher in Syria, Rami has moved into the humanitarian and development field through his work in the educational sector.





into a single body have not met with much of a welcome among the activists, let alone the ordinary people inside and outside Syria. This might be attributed to the fact that in many cases no one hears about them.

Furthermore, mechanisms of female representation, and even their connection with the popular base, are almost totally lacking within the activist movement. Political and social activist 'SH' believes that the sexism is one of the most important reasons for the decline in the role played by women:

'Even when regime figures come under attack they are criticised in the most sexist way. For instance, [deputy Prime Minister] Walid Muallem is accused of being a traitor but [presidential and media adviser] Buthaina Shaaban gets called a whore. Isn't the real problem our sexism?'

### Marginalisation of Women on the Ground

The marginalisation of women on the national level is also perpetuated on the international stage. There is a modest reference to the importance of female representation in the transitional period in the final report of the Syrian Working Groups at the first Geneva conference in 2012. This seems to have drawn attention to the need for such representation in the peace process and post-conflict phase. Following the release of this report, a series of women's associations were formed which might have together constituted a pressure bloc highlighting the effective role played by women since the start of the revolution.<sup>3</sup>

One of the major weaknesses of the entire Syrian opposition is that it is divided – not only by different political visions or by different opposition groups being sponsored by, aligned with, influenced by or cooperating with different foreign countries, but also geographically. The Syrian regime has relentlessly bombarded territories not under its control any longer which has made it virtually impossible for Syrians to be part of the internal opposition and at the same time participate in international efforts to find a solution to the crisis. The opposition inside Syria is mainly busy with coping with the deteriorating humanitarian situation. Due to this fact, the voices from inside became weaker and are focussing on fund appeal. The National Coalition of Syria, based in Istanbul, has never been able to establish a presence in Syria. Its members have hardly ever travelled there and it has had little to offer for those inside Syria.

This problem, affecting the entire work of the opposition, is even more pronounced

when it comes to women. Behind the scenes women are continuing with revolutionary work, but because they are not that visible, they do not come to mind when talking about representatives. Therefore, as less prominent activists, women's chances to obtain visas have been a problem from the beginning for both maintaining their safety and promoting their capacity to affect change in Syria. While some networks and organizations maintain contact and make contributions to the opposition groups on the international stage, other organisations have contact with activists that claim to credibly represent women within Syria. With most of these representatives being male, however, there is often little connection between Syrian women who are paying the price on the ground in the country, or in its prisons, or in exile, with what is being discussed by these elites in their conference rooms.

### Women to the Peace Talks

The first serious discussion on women's participation which took place in the second Geneva conference remains a praiseworthy step towards full female representation, for all that they have increasingly failed to account for the true conditions of women in Syria. However, no sooner was a date for the second phase of the negotiation process declared than Syrian women rushed to meet with UN Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi. Brahimi was quite clear that there should not be a third bloc at the negotiation table, which appears to have been a demand of some of the 47 women who met with Brahimi on January 12 and 13, 2014. It was here, according to observers, that they fell into the trap of demanding representation for the sake of representation rather than action itself. After all, what is the benefit of female representation completely decoupled from actual revolutionary work?

It is fair to state that the final demand presented to Lakhdar Brahimi that women make up no less than thirty per cent of the negotiating parties was more realistic and met a positive response from the envoy himself, who agreed to take on the women's demands which overlapped with those of the Syrian opposition albeit subject to negotiation in some of their particulars.<sup>4</sup>

Civil society in Syria had been mocked as 'cocktail civil society' before 2011 because of being allegedly a presence for the most part at different embassies' occasions and celebrations. The National Coalition and its predecessors were termed the 'Five Star Opposition' in reference to them spending their time in luxury

hotels detached from realities on the ground in Syria. It therefore didn't take long for the phrase *soreyat jeneef* to be coined, meaning 'the Syrian women of Geneva'. This gained currency as a way to talk about the women activists taking part in the conference, and contains an implicit disparagement of the role played by these women in talks by other female activists.

Have female activists truly transitioned away from laying foundations and building networks on the ground, mounting campaigns of support and broadcasting the suffering of Syrian women in squares throughout the country? Is their purpose now simply to solicit UN support and make repeated references to Security Council Resolution 1325<sup>5</sup> and the report of the first Geneva conference on Syria?

Even as prominent women opposition figures were facing setbacks on the ground and becoming divided amongst themselves, the situation was no better within the general mass of Syrian women's networks and associations. While some activists were having their loyalty to the revolution questioned, others were accused of opportunism, taking advantage of the sacrifices of other Syrian women who had no way of making their voices heard.

Following the resignations of UN special envoy Kofi Annan in August 2012 and his successor Lakhdar Brahimi, in May 2014 Staffan de Mistura was appointed to manage the negotiation process. De Mistura began to institute a new approach: to work out truces on the local level. Women were completely absent from these local level negotiations, which were conducted by influential figures from the regime close to the opposition but which the regime had no interest in getting rid of for reasons that in many cases were likely to have been economic. No one was privy to what took place behind closed doors as these

deals were made: the concept of fully inclusive participation didn't have a chance. The majority of these local agreements unsurprisingly worked in favour of the regime, and activists took to terming them 'surrender treaties'. These haggling sessions were marketed as success stories ahead of the expected announcement that negotiations in Geneva were to resume.

Despite what one might glean from a superficial reading of the process to end hostilities – that it constituted excellent groundwork and lent political support to grateful regional players – it was this third (and what many hoped would be final) phase that presented the Syrian opposition with intractable problems. When it came to the inclusion of women, opposition blocs bandied about the idea of a female presence, an idea that even female participants themselves claimed as unique at the second Geneva conference. The 33 members of the High Negotiation Committee (HNC) included two women, and the participants of the later Riyadh conference called for an additional Women's Advisory Board to be attached to the envoy's office. This was a measure taken to satisfy the demands of those who had previously pledged their commitment to female representation. The HNC took on the 'burden' of ensuring a female presence by pushing for the formation of an independent Women's Advisory Board.

The pledges made by de Mistura's predecessors about ensuring women's participation conceivably boxed de Mistura in. He ended up releasing a statement of his intention to send invitations to feminist and civil society organisations to contribute to the talks. The independent Women's Advisory Board was formed and appended to de Mistura's office. The cosmetic nature of this representation was however obvious to the naked eye despite

the optimism in de Mistura's tone about this participation: 'Both women and civil society organisations can provide vital ideas and insight to the talks by presenting the views and recommendations of important segments of Syrian society.'

But can we truly assert that to be from the same sex is to have the same political demands? The independent Women's Advisory Board is made up of twelve women who hold differing political views, with the majority closer to the regime and therefore in fundamental disagreement with the opposition itself. Some were even seen coordinating with the regime delegation before and during the talks.<sup>6</sup> It is unclear upon which criteria the Board was formed, and they represent nobody involved in political work in Syria, however tangentially. This group therefore could not be said to serve the goal of women's inclusive participation.

It would be unfathomable for anybody in any other issue area to have come up with the idea of randomly selecting regime loyalists and dissidents to speak for a joint cause.

It might be suggested that de Mistura was thinking that it would be easier to build a bridge between the two opposing delegations by creating a new body which is 'less' polarised due to biological difference and that women would not fundamentally disagree about political topics because of their shared gender. The reaction from the Syrian Feminist Lobby, the Syrian Women's Network and others was decisive: they rushed to absolve themselves of involvement in the conformist wording of the recommendations, which were read out at the board's press conference, which were totally divorced from the reality they had witnessed in Syria as activists.

Many activists suspected de Mistura established the Board not to amplify the voices

of women, but to confirm his own agenda. It is untenable to suggest that Syrian women and Syrian activists would find such 'representation' acceptable given that their own demands are so different from those proposed by the Women's Advisory Board. For example, the Women's Advisory Board in the same press conference asked for an immediate lifting of the sanctions imposed on Syria as 'they hinder the delivery of aid to Syrian people', as though it were the sanctions which were preventing food from entering Eastern Ghouta and other besieged areas and not the regime's own actions. They also boldly asked for an immediate release of detainees held by all parties.

An activist known as AS was one of the official observers participating in the talks. He recalls that, 'de Mistura was insisting on their advisory role and they were insisting on their representational role.' AS shrugged and continued sarcastically; 'in any case, the Russians and Americans were the true negotiating parties, not the regime or opposition, and so there's no need to get alarmed about all these roles!'

Despite the importance of women's roles in the revolution, it is clear that the opposition had no real vision for the role of Syrian women in the subsequent negotiation process or in a post-conflict Syria. Any attempts to look at the Syrian constitution and repressive 'personal status' laws, or at potential figures for female representation, were all half-hearted and fell far short of offering a clear transitional strategy. The process of forcing roles on women from outside the activist core led to the very problems they had managed to avoid during the peaceful phase of the uprising.



## Challenging Domination

The institutional structures of the peace process also had a negative impact on women's participation, robbing their roles of any true content through frameworks that in a best-case scenario might approximate the set-up of the General Women's Union. Yet Syrian women have not been waiting for someone to draw up roles for them in this phase of revolutionary activism: they have been the main planners and motivators from the outset. They will not be able to impose their presence if they accept crumbs from the political high table.

Challenging all kinds of domination and custodianship should be the goal for the upcoming period. This does not mean working separately from men or advancing women's interest at the expense of men to create completely different paths that might lead to nothing. On the contrary. The world witnessed the active role that Syrian women played and are still playing in the Syrian uprising. Despite these setbacks, building on these achievements means staying connected to the people who took to the streets demanding their freedom and dignity, and remaining attuned to the changing needs of Syrian women. The momentum of the popular drive for change, which saw men finally giving up their leverage over women, should be used to challenge more gendered taboos in the Syrian community.

How might this work in practice given the nature of the peace process thus far? Perhaps, instead of waiting for de Mistura to ask them to gather and create a separate body, tailored

to fit what the UN and de Mistura wish to hear, Syrian women could actively work through the opposition's institutions and present their vision to mediators and other players. This would enhance the opposition's position in being united and representing the demands of the Syrian people, not just the male half of the population. There is also a need for the male-dominated opposition to ask itself whether accepting such a desperate initiative from de Mistura and the UN was indeed a good strategy. Enhancing women's role from inside the opposition will only strengthen their capacity to deliver real change for Syria.

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

- 1 See for example: Women from Darayia demonstrating on 25.04.2011: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EW1AqgDo1b0>
- Women demonstrating in Douma 18.06.2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSxlwjiPxI0>
- Women demonstrating in Homs – Baba Amr <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcHIAncBw>
- One of the largest women's demonstrations in Nawa-Daraa <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXI42IEDtWo>
- Women demonstrating in Daraa: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rt6UWvg47ZM>
- Women demonstrating in Hama: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnloGBGA4B0>
- 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0eGLzLk0kHY>
- 3 Among them the Syrian Women's Forum for Peace and the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy and others.
- 4 <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARACAEA0C0HO20140113?pageNumber=2&virtualBrandChannel=0&sp=true>
- 5 UN resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>
- 6 Ahmad Kamel talking to Orient TV.



A Lebanese woman shouting at policemen during the 2016 garbage demonstration in Beirut  
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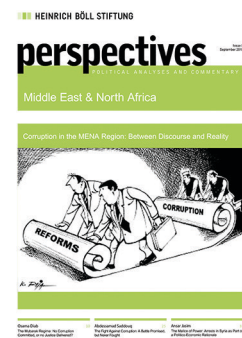
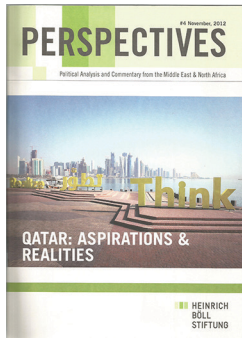
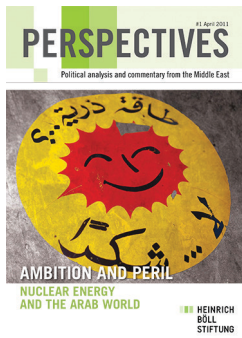
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