

## Women in Syria – The inside story

The Guardian The Workers' Weekly By Wayne Sonter 16 April 2014

<http://www.cpa.org.au/guardian/2014/1635/11-women-in-syria.html>

The Western mainstream media have kept on message over the last three years, persistently presenting the violence in Syria as stemming from a ruthless tyrant's suppression of a people's yearning for freedom and democracy.



As the war progressed and the Syrian state stood firm, the mainstream account has adapted accordingly. The war became a civil war, one that is increasingly sectarian, with both sides committing atrocities and religious extremists becoming the foremost opposition forces. This, in turn, is used as an argument for “humanitarian” intervention.

As the line goes, the tyrant Assad of course is still held responsible, because of his refusal to step down so a “transitional” government, composed of the opposition forces, can take over Syria.

Those who look beyond this mass media fairy tale know the real story is very different, that the war in Syria is a long planned project for regime change, initiated by the United States and its NATO and Gulf state “allies”, along the lines of what was done in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and now Ukraine.

Those the Western media and politicians designate as the “opposition” are not the opposition that actually exists in Syria, who oppose the Baathist government, but defend the independence of Syria and its secular state. Many of these parties are represented in the national parliament and in local government.

The only “opposition” the Western media and politicians recognise are the creations maintained by the US, NATO and the Gulf states. The armed “rebels” are in the main foreign mercenaries – gangsters and jihadi death squads, paid for by Qatar and Saudi Arabia, equipped, trained and

directed by US, French and British special forces, operating from bases and command centres in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Israel.

Australia a lackey

Australia, as a completely loyal US lackey, totally obeisant to its military and intelligence apparatus, is part of this gang of criminal conspirators, gathered together under the name, “Friends Of Syria”!

So it is no surprise that when a delegation from Australia recently visited Syria, to show solidarity with Syrian people and gauge the actual situation, both Liberal and Labor parties and the mass media broadly condemned it.

Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop called the visit “reckless” and claimed it risked involving Australia in the conflict, but also claimed the delegation’s visit undermined sanctions Australia has on Syria, thus aligned Australia with one side of the conflict, “which is something we would not do”!

Labor frontbencher Chris Bowen called the delegation’s visit “irresponsible” and “extraordinary”, claiming that to “go and have discussions and try to provide some legitimacy” to the Syrian government demanded an explanation.

At the same time print and broadcast media made sure very little space was given to members of the delegation to actually report what they witnessed in Syria, merely attacking them for going at all!

Members of the delegation have tried to outflank the persistent refusal by the media and the political establishment to allow the real story on Syria to reach the mainstream, by holding a number of forums and using social media to get their message out.

One such forum was held recently at Sydney University where three of the Syrian-Australian women who were part of the delegation, plus another well known Syrian-Australian activist, Mimi al Laham, better known as Syrian Girl Partisan, addressed a full auditorium.

Delegation member, Jasmine Saadat, in introducing the speakers made a few salient points:

The conflict in Syria has now endured for three years and the world has witnessed unimaginable atrocities, with children as well as religious figures beheaded, women raped and tortured and forced into prostitution and thousands of Syrians kidnapped for ransom;

It was evident early on that armed militias intended to escalate events, and while millions of Syrians took to the streets to show their solidarity with the Syrian state and each other, media reports, generated by the Qatari owned Al Jazeera, distorted the truth and portrayed events with great bias;

The Syrian government called on many occasions for the opposition to come to the table, offered new reforms and amnesty for all who had not committed atrocities, yet the opposition never came, choosing instead, to escalate their military efforts.

Ms Saadat said that three years on it has become apparent there never was a peaceful or popular uprising: the majority fighting are foreigners; and rather than a revolution, Syria has been set back a hundred years, as NATO-backed insurgents have systematically destroyed the country’s infrastructure, demolished cities and suburbs, looted historic relics, devastated more than two-thirds

of Syria's public hospitals and health centres and 3,500 schools and universities, desecrated churches and mosques and blown up electric towers and gas pipelines.

### Women's rights

Al-Qaeda affiliated groups now roam the country reaping chaos, death and destruction and women have suffered immensely in all this.

"If these extremists take over the country," Ms Saadat said, "what will become of women of Syria? What will become of their rights? What will be the status of a woman in Syria?"

Reme Sakr, who went to school in both Syria and Australia, said that to know what is at stake in Syria we need to know what the country was like before the war.

When people talk about a movement in Syria supposedly helping the country move forward into freedom and democracy, we need to know how Syrians were really living, because the worst thing to do would be to try to help a nation move forward, but instead take it back hundreds of years – unless of course, that is what is really intended.

Ms Sakr pointed out that in Syria girls and women have access to free education from kindergarten to university. To achieve a degree of equality in society, women need access to education and Syrian women have that.

Women in Syria occupy senior positions in all sorts of roles, including in government.

Unlike other Arab nations, Syrian women get custody of children in marital disputes and the Syrian constitution guarantees women all the opportunities that enable them to participate fully and effectively in political, social, cultural and economic life. The state works to remove the restrictions that prevent women's development and their participation in building socialist, Arab society.

Ms Sakr said there is always more to do, but what Syrian women already have is an achievement for the region and needs to be protected, yet the Western world today is working with Saudi Arabia, one of the most anti-woman and anti-democratic governments in the world, to overthrow the Syrian state and its secular society.

Wherever their genocidal religious fanatics have gained control and imposed their radical fundamentalist form of sharia law, women have been turned into slaves, with every aspect of their lives controlled by a man.

A young woman was recently publicly strangled in one of these 'liberated' areas for not adhering to sharia law and another stoned to death for having a facebook account, this being regarded as equivalent to adultery, so punishable by death.

Ms Sakr met a young woman from Aleppo, whose uncle had been killed and father and brother kidnapped by the Western-backed militias; she herself was a target because her fiancé was Alawite. Militias had threatened to cut her head off and hang it in the centre of Aleppo, after sending ten men to rape her.

Ms Sakr said one does not have to be an Assad supporter to see that with the government's collapse or departure foreign backed mercenaries would seize control, and destroy the country, including what women have achieved. The defence of Syria, she concluded is a matter of life and death for Syrian women.

## Resilience

Elham Abboud, her husband and three children moved to Syria in 2008, where she taught as a primary school teacher for nearly six years. Elham spoke of the ongoing disruption of people's lives she witnessed on her recent return as part of the delegation to Syria, but also commended people's resilience and determination to prevail against the outside forces.

Ms Abboud recalled that in Homs, the city in which her family lived and worked, the first indication of the trouble to come in early 2011, was signalled with an outbreak of gunfire and the city's mosques loudly proclaiming that "god is great", calling people to jihad. This continued for three days, apparently in line with a prophecy that if this was maintained the earth would swallow the infidels and non-believers and a sharia society would come into being! From this point the violence escalated.

Mimi El Laham contextualised Syria in relation to other recent NATO wars, before returning to the situation in her home country. She pointed to women's rights being exploited to promote war in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and now Syria, but that in these countries women's rights were not better, but worse than they were at time of invasion.

Ms El Laham quoted Afghan feminist Malalai Joya's statement that Afghan women, "remain caged in our society, without access to justice and still ruled by women hating criminals".

Likewise in Iraq, women were free to run for office, to go to school and university and to work and freely lead a public life. Now, due to security and government suppression, women are forced to stay at home. Iraq is currently legalising marriage for girls as young as nine.

In Libya women's rights were also of a level as existed in Iraq before US invasion. With US/NATO's destruction of Libya, women are regarded as "spoils of war" and Libya is heading toward an "Afghan" model regarding women's rights, according to Libyan activist, Aicha Almagrabi, The first law the post-Gaddafi government passed was to allow men to marry more than one wife.

Returning to the situation in Syria Ms El Laham referred to the case of the fraudulent blogger, "Gay Girl in Damascus", whose supposed situation, as the "ultimate outsider revealing the dangers of political and sexual dissent in Syria" was used to vilify the Syrian government and trigger a campaign for "her" release from prison, before it was discovered that "Gay Girl" was actually an American male residing in Scotland!

Ms El Laham also spoke of young women and girls, especially those in refugee camps, being preyed on by the very same Saudi and Qatari sheiks and businessmen who are paying jihadi mercenaries to destroy Syria! She showed a video clip of girls as young as 13, from a refugee camp in Jordan, being procured as short term "wives" for these vile beings.

## Embedded media

Ms El Laham concluded that while imperialist states had exploited women's rights to start a succession of wars, these wars had destroyed women's rights. We must not let Syria be turned into another Afghanistan, she declared.

At this point an ex-SBS journalist, currently working freelance commented at length on the video, pointing out that she had talked to "hundreds" of other journalists working in the Middle East and

they all agreed the video was a hoax; that the girls in the video had later confessed that they made the video for money.

Ms El Laham responded that she and many others could confirm that events like this were taking place through their own connections and families they knew where these sorts of “marriages” were occurring.

Another member of the audience declared he had just returned from Jordan, where he lived the last four years and he had witnessed girls being bussed to premises on the street where he lived and obviously wealthy clients arriving to pick them up.

Apparently hundreds of journalists “embedded” with the forces opposed to the Syrian government, have never come across evidence of this trade, all so visible on the street, but when they checked with the authorities they were sufficiently reassured that such allegations were undoubtedly false.

The journalists’ dismissal of these victims of the Syrian war, relying instead on the more “authoritative” voice of those actually prosecuting the war – encapsulates the insidious role the mainstream media plays in these schemes of imperialist aggrandisement.

The media blocks the truth and actively fabricates falsehoods as an integral aspect of ensuring the war crimes, primarily stemming from US imperialism, but driven by the deepest contradictions in the whole capitalist system, can proceed while keeping the masses as passivised and social upheaval as minimised as possible.

This makes it even more critical that the truth behind the media facades is exposed and disseminated, so people are aware of, and no longer tolerate what their governments and elites do in their name.

The women who have witnessed the true story of what is happening inside Syria are determined to do this.