

# Syria, 15 Months Later

Yasmeen Hussain

It has been a little over a year since I returned from a summer visit to Syria. I was 20 years old. I traveled, explored, and learned some Arabic, but most importantly, I encountered values from a society that promotes generosity, love, family, peace, and friendship. The love I received from my family that summer is enough to empower me for years. Even today, a full 15 months later, I still strongly feel the admiration and support of people who reside 6,000 miles away in a desert oasis. If that is not a remarkable feature of love, then I don't know what is.

Yasmeen is a fourth-year in the College majoring in International Studies and Political Science.

I was in Syria for 11 weeks in 2011, from June until late August. Despite the country's growing disease of instability, that visit—the longest time I had spent away from the U.S. since moving here 13 years earlier—revitalized my soul and reawakened a sense of personal identity. I left Chicago with the intention of learning Arabic and spending time with family, and yet I returned with an entirely different mindset and understanding of politics, society, and cross-cultural appreciation. Instability or not, I simply was not ready to take that flight back to America. I was so happy, I could have stayed in Syria forever.

Having the ability to hop on a plane and fly to the safety of America carries with it a feeling of uneasiness, not of relief. I'm happy to have been born in a nation where highway car explosions are not the norm—a place that never has to worry about civil war, sectarian violence, or an ailing governmental system. I returned to the stable enclave of America, went back to school, and engaged in normal everyday life...but for a very long time it did not feel like I'd left. I seemed to

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have left my heart and mind with my family members in Damascus.

Recently when I was home in California, I spoke to my family after six months of being away in Chicago, and my heart broke as I noted their quiet, cautious tone—a stark change from our last conversation in March.



I asked my uncle how his kids were. He replied: “They’re alive, thank God.” I was speechless—this came from a man who flavors our conversations with irony and humor, and is one of the toughest people I know. I had spent so much of my time worrying over my family’s physical safety, but what never occurred to me was the sheer mental toll this war was taking on everyday Syrians, especially on the young; life seemed to be drained out of my cousin’s usually vibrant face.

My family and country-mates are going through hell.

While I was in Syria, I came to understand that there are concepts and ‘ideals’ that exist in the Middle East that do not exist in the West. I grew up in the United States with a strong adherence to American ideals, and yet I hold a deep admiration for the Arab world because of my heritage. This past visit to Syria opened my eyes to what is missing in the West. One example is, simply put, the absence of being treated exceptionally well based on the appreciation society has for the gender that has the ability to give life. That is, when I was in Syria I was treated like a goddess. I was treated so well because I was a guest and because I am female—a sacred gender seen not as the weaker sex, but as the gentler one, the important half of society making it complete. This is a strange notion for some to grapple with, since the Middle East is often portrayed as a sphere of female oppression. But what scholars seem to miss when analyzing the ‘harsh’ societies

of the Arab world is that the everyday treatment of women, at least in countries like Syria and Lebanon, have two very important key elements: respect for virtue and appreciation for being the 'gentler' sex.

It might be unfair to compare the Middle East to the West. This is especially true when considering how Western systems of values might be imposed on Middle Eastern citizens. I would argue that real political reform should come from within, as a series of negotiations between citizens and their leader. Western media, policy makers, and analysts need to pull away from the belief that what exists and works for the West is the best system for everyone, regardless of societal make up, national sentiment, and cultural identity. Whether people choose to believe it, Bashar al Assad was a popular leader for much of last year, and he enjoyed the support of minorities, a large portion of the middle class, and business elites, as well as the upper echelons of the military. Early in 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton denied military intervention in Syria because she praised Assad as a reformer. But as the conflict drew out, and after it was clear what was at stake in the relationships between Hezbollah, Tehran, and Damascus, the Obama administration changed its tune. By the end of my visit, Obama released the statement calling for Assad to step down.

So began the battle for Syria.

During the final presidential debate, Obama briefly laid out his administration's strategy for Syria: The United States is mobilizing support from the international community and providing monetary assistance and political support for a moderate opposition outside Syria. He noted how the U.S. is very concerned about the humanitarian crisis and is aligning itself with moderate



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opposition groups that will not pose a threat to American or Arab interests in the long run. (He emphasized the importance of keeping arms away from extremists who may infiltrate the region.)



After watching the series of events unfold over the past year and a half, the American strategy for Syria is extraordinary—indeed, it's far better than what the Bush administration might have done in a similar situation. The Obama administration is passing the buck to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar to deal with the regional hegemony of Assad and Iran. However, no matter what strategy is in place, the sad fact remains that a geopolitically strategic country like Syria, with strong ties to Iran and Hezbollah, will always be on the dark side of Western (primarily American) interests. It did not matter that Bashar al Assad actually enjoyed a fair amount of support throughout most of 2011 from his people as well as the upper echelons of the military; that the Saudi and Qatari governments could be considered the furthers from free and democratic societies; that they rank terribly in protecting the rights of their own

citizens; or that the Western media (as well as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya) grossly exaggerate the aggressiveness of the Syrian government while shedding very little light on the voices of the country's moderate citizens or the brutality of the opposition. Bashar made his enemies by too closely aligning himself with Nasrallah and Tehran, and the U.S. will do everything it can without direct military intervention to break apart this growing regional hegemony. I am disheartened to say that the argument for 'protecting human rights' and 'concern for the wellbeing of the Syrian people' serves as a mask to the real political intentions of the West. And the people who are paying most for this battle for influence are Syrians with their own blood. Those who suffer the most from this unnecessary war are people like my family. And there is nothing I, an American who enjoys the fruits of this pow-

erful nation, can do. Such is the tragedy of being Syrian-American.

But what about those Syrians who had legitimate demands for reform early in the uprising, back in March of 2011? That initial group of protesters in Deraa who, inspired by the events in Tunisia and Egypt, cried for reformation of the corrupt political system and the brutality of the secret police? Those calls should have been immediately addressed by the Syrian government, and it bears the re-



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sponsibility for not responding in a prompt and peaceful manner to the people who demanded that their voices be heard. Changes in the stale governmental system came too slowly, and the president missed opportunities for avoiding any future internal unrest, which

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continued to bubble. What should have been a swift movement to peacefully end an internal conflict has grown to be a civil and proxy war, with the glittering hope of peace fading with each passing day.

The most precious news in the world for me now concerns the welfare of my family and loved ones who are currently living through this state of inferno. I promised them that the moment things let up—the moment the country has a chance to breathe—I am returning to be with the people that I love. If there is anything I have learned from this extraordinary experience that began 15 months ago, it is simply that I cannot live without the oxygen that is my family. This beautiful country has penetrated my soul so deeply that it is now an undeniable part of me.