

TODAY'S ZAMAN



Two dissidents -- one Syrian, one Libyan: The power of the people will prevail

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Two dissident women, one from Syria and one from Libya, visiting İstanbul for a conference, told Monday Talk that the people's power is so strong that the old dictatorial regimes in the region must see that the supporters of democracy are powerful enough to challenge tyrants.

“He doesn't understand that legitimacy comes from the people,” said Afra Jalabi, an Arab-Canadian peace advocate who was born in Syria, referring to Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad. Nadia Gaouda of Libya said that in her country the revolutionaries want to prove long-time ruler of Libya deceased Muammar Gaddafi wrong. “He always said: ‘When I go, you will live in chaos, you will be lost and confused. You will destroy the country. You cannot live without me,’” said Gaouda, who is from Benghazi, a city of roughly 700,000.

Both women were in İstanbul last week for the Women's Islamic Initiative on Spirituality and Equality (WISE) conference, “Muslim Women Leaders: At the Frontlines of Change.” Answering our questions, they talked about dictatorships, revolutions and the future of the Arab Spring as all of this relates to their own experiences. Born in Damascus, Jalabi once worked as a journalist but is now a Ph.D. candidate in religious studies. Gaouda, born and raised in Libya, worked in the petroleum industry as a financial manager. She is now engaged in civil society work as well.

Afra Jalabi: Assad will fall

‘It’s not a matter of whether or not he will fall, but a matter of when. He has no stature. He has fear all around him. He will pay for the excessive brutality he has used’

The Arab Spring has been fairly non-violent in Tunisia and in Egypt. Why do you think it has been so brutal in Syria?

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Because that’s the source of power for the regime: brutality and fear. If the government doesn’t act brutally, most of Syria will come out [to protest against the regime]. We have not yet seen the protestors in Syria. What we see is now are some peaceful kamikazes, who come out willing to die.

What is the situation for your family members in Syria? Do you have any family members or friends in Syria who have been forced into hiding, jailed, killed or forced to flee the country due to their anti-regime activities?

At the beginning of the revolution my cousins were arrested for close to a month. Recently, we lost a friend, Ghiyath Mattar, who died under torture in Daraya, one of the suburbs of Damascus. He was captured on Sept. 6 together with two other non-violent activists, Yahya Shurbaj and his brother. The body of Mattar, 25, was delivered to the family on Sept. 10. He bore the marks of severe torture, bullet wounds and a long incision down the front of his body, indicating possible organ theft. There have been several bodies returned with similar incisions on them.

What is the role of women in the revolution?

They were some of the first people to come out in Damascus and Latakia. One woman was hit by thugs, and she went to the police to complain about it. She was beaten by the police at the police station. They told her that they would kill her if she went out again. She is in hiding now. There are female lawyers who are imprisoned. When men were arrested, women went out to protest. In some cases, the regime's forces shot women, too.

When was the last time you were in Syria?

Three years ago. Before the revolution, I was on the wanted list because I joined the Damascus Declaration three years ago. [The police] sometimes barge into my cousin's house. One time my sister was there in my cousin's house, and they confiscated my cousin's computer. They put him in jail for two-and-a-half years for using the Internet.

Experts say that the Syrian regime's intelligence is very strong.

It is a web of fear consisting of several structures and reports directly to the president. They report directly to the president. My family has been engaged in activism. We do not belong to a political party and we do not support the regime. We are independent and pro-democracy.

What is your family background?

My mother is Circassian, my father is from the north. My family is Sunni. I am the result of an inter-ethnic marriage. I live in Canada where the society has ethnic and religious intersections, like in Syria. But in Syria, the regime has been trying to use that to instigate conflict based on sectarian and ethnic issues.

When you joined the Damascus Declaration, could you have predicted what was about to happen in Syria?

No, I didn't. I joined the declaration because I felt obliged to do something. I believe in gradual change, and I admire the Turkish model.

Why?

[Turkey has] had military dictatorships, several coups and attempts to interrupt democracy. The patience of the Turkish people gradually shifted the country toward democracy without having to go through a revolution. I believed that if we do little things, we will help the country to shift toward democracy. That's why I joined the Damascus Declaration. The aim of the declaration was not to overhaul the regime. The Assad regime is in love with the declaration now that it is too late. But when it came out, they arrested many people who supported it and kept many of those people in prison for years. So there was no margin of freedom left. I also felt that there was no hope. I am generally optimistic about the power of life, but there was no sign at all.

What do you think is going to happen in Syria now?

Assad will fall. It's not a matter of whether or not he will [fall], but a matter of when. He has no stature. He has fear all around him. He will pay for the excessive brutality he has used. He has lost his "heybet" [nobility, stature] completely. The protestors have also destroyed the image of his father. All of his statutes are brought down.

Do you think the Syrian army will follow in the footsteps of the Tunisian and Egyptian armies by protecting the demonstrators in the country?

In Egypt, they are facing a lot of issues because it was the military backing up the people, so now people still feel the power of the military there. In our age, the military is no longer a viable institution. We are in an age where power comes from knowledge. In the Arab world, militaries have been associated with oppression rather than dissent. It has been the tool of legitimizing the state with brutality against civilian populations. The military budget instead should go to education, health care and creating a progressive model of development. In those countries, over 80 percent of their national budgets are allocated for the army.

You said that Assad will fall. But do you think he realizes that's what the Syrian people hope for at the moment?

Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu! A week before he fell, there was a march of a million people shouting his greatness. The reason they are dictators is that they are disconnected from the world -- not just from the people but from reality. Assad is not only disconnected from his people but from the age. He doesn't understand that legitimacy comes from the people. He is from an era in which the legitimacy came from the top and from terror. His speeches sound so dusty. He uses very circular arguments about being targeted and about foreign enemies of the state -- very Orwellian.

How do you feel about the broad-based Syrian National Council, which was founded by dissidents in early October in Istanbul? How effective do you think they can be?

We are catching up with more than 40 years of work. It is exciting to see that there is networking and regrouping. It's natural that there will be challenges. Sometimes people are frustrated. It shows that politicians are humans. Now the public is judging their performance; they have to deliver and perform. It's the basis of democracy. There is no longer only one person ruling. This is a group of people coming from different backgrounds and trying to address problems with a pluralistic approach. It represents a paradigm shift from a personality cult and dictatorship to collective and civic work.

Nadia Gaouda: We want a pluralistic society

'Now we want to create a pluralistic society. We will never allow a dictator to rule us again. We need to empower our youth through education'

Did you ever anticipate that what is going on Libya was actually going to happen?

No, I did not. I was in despair and I thought nothing would ever change in Libya.

What happened in Benghazi, your hometown, when the protests first erupted in February?

A few young ladies started to organize protests through Facebook. Initially, the protestors were asking for a new constitution. There were political problems. The sons of Gaddafi were trying to manipulate the situation. Young and old, everyone began to support the uprising. Sometimes very small towns led the uprising in eastern areas. This revolution was surprising. The Libyan people were surprised by what happened in Libya. This was a revolution of songs.

Would you elaborate on that? I heard that there were rap songs promoting the revolution. And I heard that there is one rap song which is familiar to any Libyan who made his or her way to Benghazi's central square after Feb. 21, when the city fell from Gaddafi's control, to become the de-facto capital of liberated Libya.

We had many such songs. Every city sent songs to other cities. They are amazing songs. Beautiful rhymes. There were special songs for every city in Libya.

What can you tell me about Gaddafi's forces' attack on protestors in Benghazi on Saturday, March 19 [shortly after the United Nations authorized military action to protect civilians]. You were there.

I live in the west of Benghazi. We heard that Gaddafi's forces had taken over some cities nearby. But I did not believe it. I thought that this was just a rumor. But apparently Gaddafi's forces were preparing to take Misurata, just as had taken Zawiya, another western town which had been held by the opposition. I live in the first district of Benghazi, so if they came to Benghazi, they would reach us first. Then it became a reality. Fighting raged late Friday and Saturday morning between Gaddafi's forces and our people in Benghazi. Our boys and young people kept the forces away so we could escape. They kept them away through the hours of the night. Early in the morning Gaddafi's troops reached Benghazi. More people from the east came to fight with the troops and keep Benghazi safe. Then NATO came in. Our people delayed the arrival of Gaddafi's troops, and a lot of young men died in the process, but without NATO, we would all have been killed. Our young people saved our lives.

You look very emotional at the moment. Let's take a break if you wish.

I look at life differently now. Those young men who were killed to protect our lives influenced my attitude. We have a duty now. It is not just about the removal of Gaddafi, no. If we don't change our attitude and mentality, another dictator can rule Libya. We have to carry on the revolution. I was never involved in politics before, but now I work for an NGO. We have to make a big change in the country.

There are now worries about where the country is heading. Do you fear of chaos and instability in the country?

There was so much brutality carried out by Gaddafi. People are right now so deeply motivated to keep the revolution successful and not to corrupt it, after witnessing his brutality. I am talking about the majority of people in Libya, the general public. The experiences we went through together have created solidarity and cohesion. People are very motivated to solve problems. I am personally very optimistic; so are the Libyan people. Gaddafi always mocked us, saying: "When I go, you will live in chaos; you will be lost and confused. You will destroy the country. You cannot live without me." We want to prove him wrong. Our writers wrote beautiful poems during the revolution. We appreciate small things. The beautiful poetry really inspired people. We lost 42 years with Gaddafi. Now we want change.

Would you tell me about the civil society work that you do? What is your NGO work about?

It's about diversity and multiculturalism. I started attending discussion groups and talking with young people. A British NGO encouraged me to develop my ideas regarding multiculturalism and diversity. Our people have opinions and ideas, but they are not used to expressing them. Now we want to create a pluralistic society. We will never allow a dictator to rule us again. We need to empower our youth through education so they will know how to deal with the outside world. When I was first talking with young people, they were skeptical, but now they are engaging and asking questions. I was worried at the beginning about whether or not I'd be accepted by the youth, because I don't wear hijab, as opposed to the majority in Libyan society, but now I don't have such worries.

What is your opinion of the National Transitional Council (NTC)?

The NTC was made up of people who were available at the time. There would be someone near the courthouse, and he would be asked to join the NTC. They are not politicians, and may not be well qualified, but we are all united by this council. The NTC is trying its best.

Anything you would like to add?

Yes, I want to add something about Syrians. They call us the NATO revolutionaries. This is not true. We paid a very big price for freedom. You cannot achieve it just by declaring a no fly zone. The Arab nationalists are against Syria because they think what is happening there is not a revolution. But I want to ask them: What can you do for them? People are dying every day in Syria.

Anything on Turkey?

The Libyan people like Turkey very much. Turkey was not with us at the beginning of the revolution. We wanted Turkey to be with us. We were disappointed. Turkey sent us

aid, food, but a lot of women went to the airport and refused food from Turkey because it did not support the Libyan people. Women said, “We want your support, not food.” This was in April. But then Turkey changed its direction, even though it was late in doing so, and now we want to maintain good relations with Turkey.

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