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# Beloved Syria

## Considering Syrian Perspectives

**Nizar Qabbani**

Poet, Feminist and Revolutionary

**Australians in Syria**

**Apamea**

The Grand and Tragic History of Syria

**Edward W. Said**

A Scholar with Courage

**The Women of Syria**

Not to be Ignored

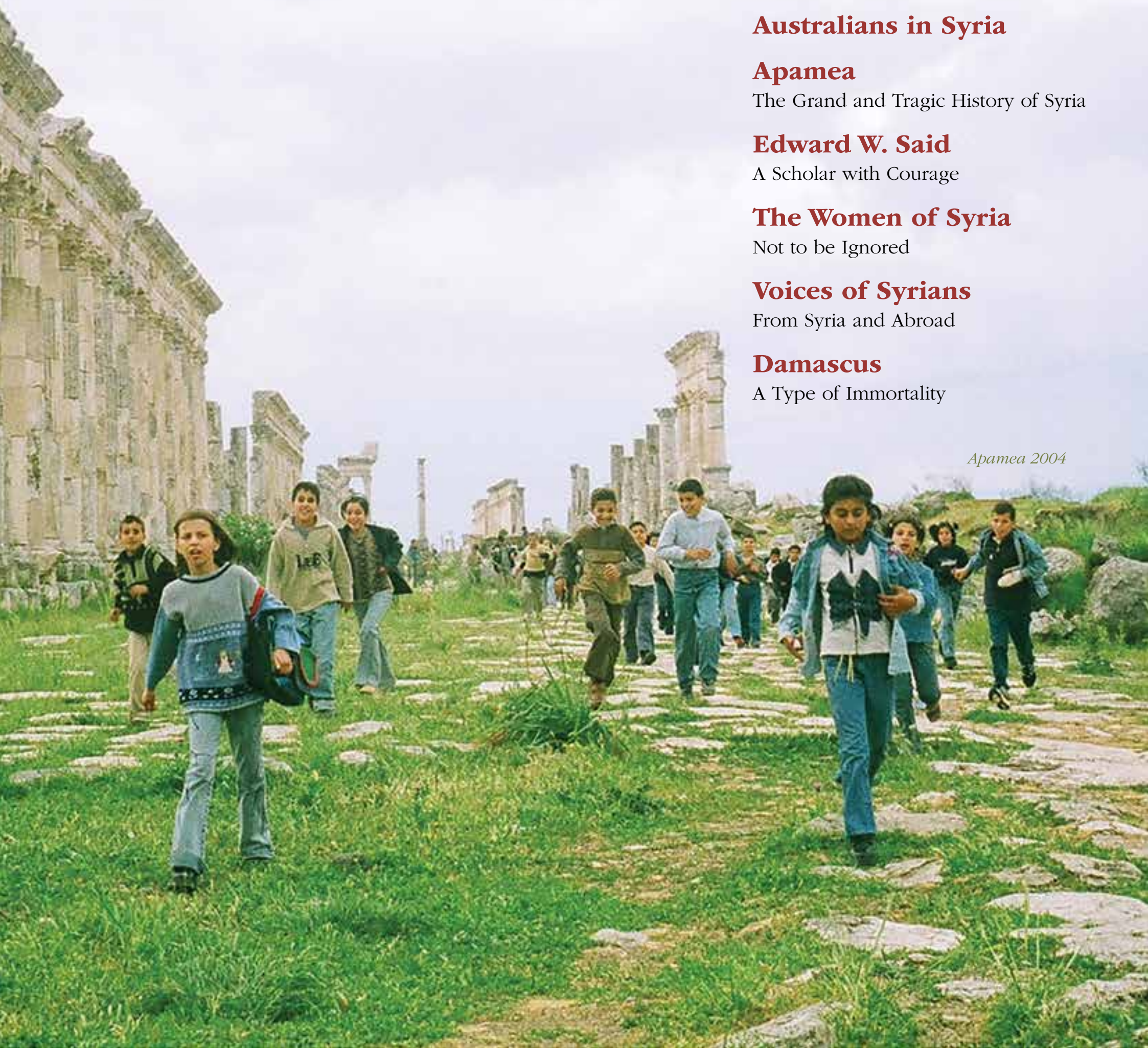
**Voices of Syrians**

From Syria and Abroad

**Damascus**

A Type of Immortality

*Apamea 2004*









# Contributors

The Syrians who have contributed to this edition of ‘Beloved Syria – Considering Syrian Perspectives’ have all had some experience of the ‘Arab Spring’. Some have left Syria, while others remain in their country. Their various faiths express the rich diversity of Syria. They share this prayer:

*May Syria and its people survive the war united; may the Eid festivals, Christmas and Easter remain national public holidays and be celebrated with joy once more; may women retain their freedoms and equalities; may the children of Syria once more be able to venture into the streets of their towns or cities without fear; and may Syrians receive understanding and respect from the outside world.*

# Images

*In 2003, I began a teaching contract at the British Council in Damascus. Charmed by the people of Syria, I sought to photograph their warmth, spirit and energy. So outside the classroom, in a cafe, music shop, hotel, hospital, university campus or hairdresser, I would approach locals, women in particular, and request to take their photograph, explaining that the world knew so little about their country and this was a chance to educate it! They invariably nodded assent. I trust the images you see in this magazine do justice to the natural warmth and graciousness of Syrians you encounter in your life.*

– Susan Dirgham, co-editor

### Editors

Norma Medawar  
Susan Dirgham

### Photographer

Susan Dirgham

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Krisztina Strzebonski  
purple ink creations

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info.belovedsyria@gmail.com



# Feature

## Nizar Qabbani – Poet, feminist and revolutionary

Someone highly revered by Syrians across the political spectrum is Nizar Qabbani, the 20th century Syrian poet.

Nizar Qabbani was born in Damascus in 1923. His father was a businessman, who was frequently arrested because of his anti-French activities. (After the First World War, Syria came under the control of France, and opposition to French rule was brutally crushed.)

As the son of a Syrian nationalist, Nizar Qabbani couldn't but be political. In 1954, one of his most famous poems, 'Bread, Hashish, and the Moon,' was debated in the Syrian parliament, with some delegates contending that legal action be taken against the poet.

However, as well as expressing despair in his writing, Qabbani's poetry is also romantic and elegant and

accessible to a general reader.

Most importantly for this issue of *Beloved Syria* is the fact that Nizar Qabbani wrote poetry with respectful reference to women and their point of view. When he was a teenager, Qabbani's family tried to force his sister to marry someone she did not love. As a consequence, she committed suicide, which may explain why Qabbani became a strong advocate for women's emancipation.

His poem 'I have no power' translated on these pages was being recited in the Middle East when across other parts of the world Sophie Loren was on cinema screens playing women of great independence and seductive power. Loren could certainly play the woman Qabbani describes in 'I have no power'. But is the poem really about a woman? It

# 'I have no power'

– by Nizar Qabbani

– translated by Norma Medawar

I have no power to change you  
Or explain your ways...

Don't believe a man can change a woman

and the claims of men fancying that  
woman comes from one of their ribs are false...

Woman never emerges from a man's rib....  
It's he who emerges from her pelvis  
like a fish rising from a basin of water

he branches from her womb  
like a brook branches away from a river...

It's he who orbits around the sun of her eyes  
and believes he is fixed in place...

I have no power to tame you  
or domesticate you...  
or refine your first instincts  
It's an impossible mission ...

I have tried my intelligence on you ...  
also my dumbness ...  
Neither guidance nor temptation worked with you...

Stay primitive as you are ...  
I have no power to break your habits ...

For thirty years you have been like this  
three hundred years ...  
three thousand years ...

ليس لي القدرة على تغييرك  
أو على تفسيرك ..

لا تُصدّقني أنّ رجلاً يمكنه تغيير امرأة

وباطلة دعاوى كلّ الرجال الذين يتوهمون،  
أنهم صنعوا المرأة من أحد أضلاعهم...

المرأة لا تخرج من ضلع الرجل أبداً ..  
هو الذي يخرج من حوضها  
كما تخرج السمكة من حوض الماء

وهو الذي يتفرّع منها،  
كما تتفرّع السواقي من النهر..

وهو الذي يدور حول شمس عينيها،  
ويتصور أنّه ثابت في مكانه...

ليس لي القدرة على ترويضك  
أو تدجينك ...  
أو تهذيب غرائزك الأولى  
هذه مهمة مستحيلة ...

لقد جربت ذكائي معك ...  
وجربت أيضاً غبائي ...  
فلم تنفع معك هداية ولا غواية ...

خلّيك بدائية كما أنت ...  
ليس لي القدرة على كسر عاداتك ...

هكذا أنت منذ ثلاثين سنة  
منذ ثلاثمائة سنة ...  
منذ ثلاثة آلاف سنة ...



might be argued that it expresses the poet's response to the contrary nature of his country. With Qabbani's poetry, there can be ambiguity and puzzle, which only adds to the delight and depth of it. A poet of his calibre can hold his readers in thrall as he explores the contradictions and frustrations of life and at other times points to life's extraordinary beauty.

Asked if he was a revolutionary, the poet answered:  
"Love in the Arab world is like a prisoner, and I want to set [it] free. I want to free the Arab soul, sense and body with my poetry. The relationships between men and women in our society are not healthy."

At the back of *Beloved Syria* is Qabbani's poem 'My Country', which takes up another theme touched on in this magazine.

*In my country the rocks are  
in love, and the vines  
are addicted*

*Our country was there ... and  
all times came after it.*

This revolutionary used a pen not a sword, and Nizar Qabbani's fearlessness shines in his writing still.



A tornado trapped in a bottle ...

A body sensing a man's scent by instinct ...  
attacks him by instinct ...  
comes over him by instinct ...

Never believe what a man says about himself,  
that he is the one who composes poems ...  
and makes children...

It's the woman who writes the poems ...  
and the man who signs his name to them ...

It's the woman who bears the children...  
and the man who signs at the maternity hospital  
that he is the father ...!!

I have no power to change your nature ...  
My books are of no use to you ...  
and my convictions do not convince you ...  
nor does my fatherly advice do you any good ...

You are the queen of chaos, of madness, belonging to no one  
Stay that way ...

You are the tree of femininity, that grows in the darkness ...  
needs no sun or water ...

You are the sea princess who has loved  
all men and has loved no one

Slept with all men...  
and slept with no one ...

You are the Bedouin woman, who went with all tribes,  
and returned a virgin ...

Stay that way ...

إعصارٌ محبوسٌ في زُجاجةٍ ...

جَسَدٌ يتحسَّسُ رائحةَ الرَّجُلِ بالفِطْرَةِ ...  
ويهاجمه بالفِطْرَةِ ...  
وينتصرُ عليه بالفِطْرَةِ ...

فلا تُصدِّقي ما يقولُهُ الرَّجُلُ عن نفسه،  
بأنه هو الذي يصنَعُ القصائد...  
ويصنَعُ الأطفال ...

إن المرأة هي التي تكتبُ الشُّعْرَ ...  
والرجل هو الذي يوقعُ ...

والمرأة هي التي تنجبُ الأطفال ...  
والرجل هو الذي يوقعُ في مستشفى الولادة  
بأنه أصبحَ أباً ...!!

ليس لي القدرةُ على تغيير طبيعتك ...  
لا كُتبي تنفعك ...  
ولا قناعاتي تُقنعك ...  
ولا نصائحي الأبويَّةُ تفيدك ...

أنت ملكةُ الفوضى، والجُنُون، وعَدَمِ الانتماء  
فظلِّي كما أنت ...

أنت شجرةُ الأنوثة التي تكبرُ في العُتْمَةِ ...  
ولا تحتاجُ إلى شمسٍ وماءٍ ...

أنت أميرةُ البحر التي أحبَّت كلَّ الرجال  
ولم تُحبَّ أحداً

وضاجعت كلَّ الرجال ...  
ولم تُضاجع أحداً ...

أنت البدويَّة، التي ذهبت مع كلِّ القبائل  
وعادت عذراءً ...

فظلِّي كما أنت ...



# Arabic Corner

The contributor to this issue's *Arabic Corner* is Iskander, from Hama, who left Syria in 2012 and now lives in Lebanon. He misses Syria terribly, and this essay expresses his love for his country.

لم أكن أعلم بأنني حين أغادر كلّ هذا الدمار.....

كلّ هذا القتل....

سيقتلني الحنين والشوق...

ولم أعلم أنني سأهرب من قتلٍ إلى قتلٍ...

فالذكريات تقتل بدون رحمة...

يا إلهي ! ما أكرم تلك الأرض ؟!

حين كنّا وكانت الابتسامة هويتنا. والتحية كلمة الأمان، والترحيب من شيمنا، وليالي صيفٍ يديرها القمر، والسهرات لا تخلو من الأغاني والرقص....

كان الجميع بخير ... والغد بخير أيضا ... لا قذائف ... لا حقد ... لا كراهية ... لا دمار ... لا خوف ... لا أطفال تبكي ... لا مشردين...

إنها الحرب.....

من أين خلق كلّ هذا ؟

لماذا وُجد ؟!

شوارعٌ بل مدنٌ بأكملها مدمرة .... وبيوتٌ خاليةٌ، وأصوات رصاصٍ ..

تلك اللحظات أحتاج فيها الخرس، لأن الصمت أهون من الكلام .. والطرش لأكتم عن مسمعي صوت ذلك التفجير اللعين وأصوات الرصاص والقتل والبكاء والانتقام.....

ولعلّ العمى يبعد عنا مواقع ما تراه العين...

سورية يا قطعة من فؤادي كم لك من دقائق هذا القلب النابض بالحب والحنان الذي ثمل بخدر الأيام ... بخدر أم تكلّي ... بخدر كل شابٍ على موعد مع حبيبته ارتدى علم بلاده في ليلة زفافه..

سورية كم من معانٍ تعنين ... وكم من أهاتٍ صرختي .. وكم من حملٍ أجهضتي ..

أنت الأمل .. أنت الغد ... أنت بلادي أنا...

فبكل ما أملك من إحساسٍ وعاطفةٍ.. بكل ما أحس من سعادةٍ وحزنٍ .. وبكل حماسٍ أمنيّتي أن تشرق شمسك من جديد

شمس السلام والمحبة..

سورية الحبيبة...



# Australians in Syria

*The grave of an Anzac in the Damascus Commonwealth War Cemetery*



On a crisp winter's morning in December 2008, a group of university students from Melbourne began their tour of Syria with a visit to the Commonwealth War Cemetery in Damascus, where over 250 Australian soldiers from both world wars have been buried. Kurt, an Australian Army officer, spoke to the students. A veteran of the war in Iraq, Kurt had been seconded to the UN Peacekeeping Mission in the Golan Heights and was based in Damascus.

Kurt explained to the students how Australian soldiers had been pivotal in both world wars in helping 'liberate' Damascus from two foreign armies: first the Turks in 1918, and then the Vichy French in 1941. In fact, in October 1918, Australian soldiers had entered Damascus before T.E. Lawrence had with his forces.

The well-tended graves and the signatures of Australians in the Visitors Book at the cemetery were a testament to the connection between the two peoples.

Asked what memories he would take away from Syria, Kurt said,

*Heeba, a student at Damascus University and the granddaughter of Palestinian refugees, 2008 (Heeba invited the La Trobe University students to her family home for a meal.)*



“...The truth of it is I've made friends here that I'll keep for life and the hospitality which I think you guys will see over the next couple of weeks while you are here from the Syrian people is unrivalled. They will give you the shirt off their back, literally. ...The Syrian people are amazing ... they have a real strength about them and you can't help but admire that aspect of their personality and their psyche as a culture. They're very, very good people. And very, very welcoming....So the things that I will remember fondly ... is the people, certainly.”

– Kurt, Australian Army Officer, Damascus, 2008  
(Recorded by Ms Tara Stomann, La Trobe University student, 2008)

*La Trobe University students with Kurt, an Australian Army officer working with UN Peacekeepers in the Golan Heights, and Fatie Darwish. Commonwealth War Cemetery, Damascus, 2008*





# Syria

Syria extends from desert landscapes to fertile plains. There are undulating hills with olive groves that stretch to the Mediterranean Sea. Under the night skies, the lights of villages twinkle. Snow-capped mountains look down on modern suburbs, but also on ancient columns, khans, castles and places of worship.

There is evidence of earthquakes and invasions stretching back millennia, but for centuries, Syrians have heard the call to prayer and the ring of church bells, and continued to welcome strangers. Faith has been maintained while people struggle with their flaws and fears.

Familiar to homes across Syria are the morning rituals. Tables are laid with dishes of olives, cucumber and tomato; bread is warmed, and fresh olive oil is poured over dips. People sip rich aromatic coffee or sweetened tea and listen to the deeply soulful lyrics of their favorite songstress.

As the day progresses, hawkers shout out their wares and cleaners sweep the streets. Public servants, shopkeepers, doctors, mechanics, housewives and students stop a servise mini-bus on its route, find a seat, and pass their fare to the driver. The coins are passed from hand to hand till they reach the driver, and the change is returned likewise. Hands are touched, but there is a convivial respectful silence. In a taxi, it is a different story; drivers often engage in jocular banter with their passengers.

After school, children may play in the street while their older siblings pour over school texts. Young couples may be seen holding hands and laughing as they cross a busy road. The middle-aged and elderly gather to ruminate on life. Friends - young men and women in the same car - might drive to their favourite café, listening to the best in Arabic and Western music on the car radio, while the honking of horns, shouts, and the blaring of music might presage a wedding party.

Religious festivals are observed in accordance with centuries-old traditions. In some years, celebrations for Eid and Christmas coincide, and their decorations festoon the souqs. Faiths are cherished and people struggle with their

shortcomings, work to overcome their fears and curb their vices, while striving to be generous.

Visitors notice that when Syrians are out in the world, they bargain, argue, laugh and connect. They engage with each other in a way that is timeless and heartfelt.

Syrians love their land, their traditions and culture, and they are proud of their ancient history and the fact that their traditions and faiths have survived through the centuries, strengthened and enriched through struggle. There is something in the air in Syria. There is a spiritual connectedness felt by people of all faiths. God and Allah are one in Syria.

It is not unusual for Syrians to speak in a crowd about Love and for these sentiments to be acknowledged by the crowd. Syrians do not expect people to be angels, but hospitality, openness and graciousness are core aspects of Syrian culture. This can be seen in the eyes and faces of Syrians one meets. The sense of freedom women had to walk the streets alone at any time, day or night, attested to the trust they had in their fellow citizens.

However, since the start of the 'Arab Spring' in Syria, this trust has given way to fear and insecurity. Unspeakable horrors have been committed. Millions of Syrians have been driven from their homes and many seek sanctuary outside their country. Millions of Syrians carry physical and psychological wounds and feelings of deep grief, rage and a sense of betrayal must torment many.

Is it possible to suffer so much and still maintain a faith and a belief in the human spirit? How does one avoid being consumed by bitterness and vengefulness when the world appears to be going mad?

If that drive in humans to express their humanity is maintained in Syria, there is hope for us all.

## Editors

- Susan Dirgham, English as a Second Language Teacher
- Norma Medawar, Translator





“ *Each civilized person in the world should admit that he has two home countries: the one he was born in, and Syria.* ”

– André Parrot, (1901 – 1980), archaeologist specializing in the ancient Near East; director of The Louvre

# Apamea

## The Grand and the Tragic History of Syria

“Had Syria not assumed pariah status in the eyes of some, the Grand Colonnade of Apamea would be considered among the ‘100 noteworthy monuments of the world’. The history of this ancient city, the ruins themselves, as well as the stunning landscape they overlook give reason to approach Apamea with a sense of awe.

Apamea’s history reflects that of Syria: waves of invasions and occupations, the waning of empires and the destructive power of natural forces. Like Syria itself, Apamea was at a strategic crossroads and suffered from the vicissitudes of various powerful forces in distant cities.

In the 3rd century BC, the settlement at Apamea came under the control of Seleucus 1, once a general of Alexander the Great and later the ruler of an empire that stretched eastwards into what is now Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Seleucus named the settlement Apamea after his Persian wife. It became the imperial army headquarters.

For some time, ancient Apamea was a bustling, colorful city with a population estimated to have reached 500,000. However, modern visitors might be more impressed on hearing of the 30,000 horses and 500 war elephants that were kept at Apamea.

General Pompey seized Apamea in 64 BC, and Mark Antony and Cleopatra were among the visitors to the city. The Romans built the Grand Colonnade, but it was not on standard Roman architectural lines, having distinctly Syrian features. The Colonnade and the theatre in Apamea, one of

the largest in the Roman Empire, pointed to the fact that great wealth was being generated by Syria. At the same time, Syrian families had risen to power in Rome, which meant the country of their birth benefited from their influence.

Both courage and treachery are evident in the details of Apamea’s history. Apamea was once the base for Bassus, a Roman knight who stood against Julius Caesar only to be defeated by Cassius, while, according to Flavius Josephus, a first-century Jewish scholar, during the Jewish-Roman wars, people in Apamea ensured that the city’s Jewish inhabitants were neither killed nor held captive.

Over the centuries many occupiers, including Persians, Crusaders, Arabs and Turks walked down Apamea’s Colonnade. The incursions of the Mongols into Syria in the 13th century may have provided a chance for Mongolian troops to view what remained of Apamea after a devastating earthquake in 1152 severely damaged many of the grand edifices of this former imperial outpost.

In its humbler times, Apamea became a popular stopover for pilgrims on their way to Mecca.

Apamea illustrates how for thousands of years, Syria has been a battleground for empires, and the DNA of modern Syrians would reflect this. The country has had a glorious and bloody history. Its people have confronted tremendous suffering and assaults over the centuries, blood has been shed and bloods have mixed. All of this would link Syrians to most corners of the earth.

Apamea





“... any attempt to force cultures and peoples into separate and distinct breeds or essences exposes not only the misrepresentations and falsifications that ensue, but also the way in which understanding is complicit with the power to produce such things as the “Orient” or the “West”.”

– Edward W. Said (*Orientalism*, p. 348, 1995 Penguin edition)

# Edward W. Said

## A Scholar with Courage

In 1998, the late Edward W. Said, a professor at Columbia University and the author of *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam*, presented a lecture entitled *The Myth of ‘The Clash of Civilizations’*. In it, Professor Said responds to Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations*, published in 1995.

Both the lecture by Professor Said and the transcript of *The Myth of ‘The Clash of Civilizations’* are available online. (Ref: Media Education Foundation.) Below are direct extracts from the lecture that may inform us on the current situation facing Syria and the world in general.

Professor Said quotes from Samuel Huntington, who claimed, ‘The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics’. Said explains that Huntington gives a great deal of ‘hostile attention’ to Islam.

The core of Huntington’s vision ... is the idea of an unceasing clash, a concept of conflict, which slides somewhat effortlessly into the political space vacated by the unrelenting war of ideas and values embodied in the un-regretted Cold War of which of course, Huntington, was a great theorist. I don’t think therefore it’s inaccurate to suggest that what Huntington’s providing in his work, especially since it’s primarily addressed to influential opinion and policy makers, is in fact a recycled version of the Cold War thesis that conflicts in today’s and tomorrow’s world will

remain not economic or social in essence but ideological. And if that is so, one ideology, the West, is the still point or the locus, around which for Huntington all other civilizations turn. In effect then, the Cold War continues, but this time on many fronts, with many more serious and basic systems of values and ideas like Islam and Confucianism struggling for ascendancy and even dominance over the West. Not surprisingly, therefore, Huntington concludes his (book) with a survey of what it is that the West must do to remain strong and keep its opponents weak and divided.

*Locals in  
a café/  
restaurant,  
2010*





He says, "The West must exploit differences and conflicts among Confucian and Islamic states to support in other civilizations groups sympathetic to Western values and interests. To strengthen international institutions that reflect and legitimate western interests and values, and to promote the involvement of non-western states in those institutions." And that's a very interventionist and quite aggressive attitude towards other civilizations to get them to be more western. So strong and insistent is Huntington's notion that other civilizations necessarily clash with the West and so relentlessly aggressive and chauvinistic is his prescription for what the West must do to continue winning, so that the reader is forced to conclude that he's really most interested in continuing and expanding the Cold War by other means, rather than advancing ideas that might help us to understand the current world scene or ideas that would try to reconcile between cultures.

Not only will conflict continue, but he says, the conflict between civilizations will be the latest phase in the evolution of conflict in the modern world. It's as a very brief and rather crudely articulated manual in the art of maintaining a wartime status in the minds of Americans and others, that Huntington's work has to be now understood. I go so far as saying that it argues from the standpoint of Pentagon planners and Defence industry executives, who may have temporarily lost their occupations after the end of the Cold War but have now discovered a new vocation for themselves. But perhaps because Huntington is more interested in policy prescriptions than he is either in history or careful analysis of cultures, Huntington in my opinion is quite misleading in what he says and how he puts things. A great deal of his argument, first of all, depends on second and third hand opinion that scants the enormous advances in our concrete understanding and theoretical understanding of how cultures work. How they change, and how they can best be grasped or apprehended....

Far from being an arbiter between civilizations, which is what he suggests he might be doing, Huntington is a partisan, advocate of one civilization over all the others. ...

To emphasize the differences between cultures is completely to ignore the literally unending debate about defining the culture or civilization within those civilizations including western ones. These debates completely

undermine any idea of a fixed identity and hence the relationships between identities. ...

Too much attention paid to managing and clarifying the clash of cultures obliterates something else, the fact of a great and often silent exchange and dialogue between them. What culture today, whether Japanese, Arab, European, Korean, Chinese, Indian, has not had long intimate and extraordinarily rich contacts with other cultures? There is no exception to this exchange at all....

It seems to me that unless we emphasize and maximize a spirit of cooperation and humanistic exchange, and here I don't speak simply of uninformed delight or amateurish enthusiasm for the exotic but rather a profound existential commitment and labour on behalf of the other. Unless we do that, we are going to end up superficially and stridently banging the drum for our culture in opposition to all the others....

...the weakest part of the clash of cultures and civilizations thesis is the rigid separation assumed between them despite the overwhelming evidence that today's world is, in fact, a world of mixtures, of migrations and of crossings over, of boundaries traversed. One of the major crises affecting countries like France, Britain and the U.S. has been brought about by the realization, now dawning everywhere, that no culture or society is purely one thing. Sizeable minorities, North Africans in France, the African Caribbean, and Indian populations in Britain, Asian and African elements in this country, dispute the idea that civilization, that prided themselves on being homogeneous can continue to do so. There are no insulated cultures or civilizations. Any attempt made to separate them into the watertight compartments alleged by Huntington and his ilk does damage to their variety, their diversity, their sheer complexity of elements, their radical hybridity. The more insistent we are on the separation of the cultures, the more inaccurate we are about ourselves and about others. The notion of an exclusionary civilization is to my way of thinking an impossible one. The real question then is whether in the end we want to work for civilizations that are separate or whether we should be taking the more integrative but perhaps more difficult path which is to try to see them as making one vast hole, whose exact contours are impossible for any person to grasp, but whose certain existence we can intuit and feel and study.

Much more productive and useful is a new global mentality or consciousness that sees the dangers we face from the standpoint of the whole human race. These dangers include the pauperization of most of the globe's population, the emergence of virulent local, national, ethnic and religious sentiment as in Bosnia, Rwanda, Lebanon, Chechnya and elsewhere, the decline of literacy and onset of a new illiteracy based on electronic modes of communication, television and the new information global superhighway, the fragmentation and threatened disappearance of the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment. Our most precious asset in the face of such a dire transformation of history is the emergence not of a sense of clash but a sense of community, understanding, sympathy, and hope, which is the direct opposite of what Huntington provokes.

... efforts to return the community of civilizations to a primitive stage of narcissistic struggle, needs to be understood, not as descriptions about how in fact civilizations behave, but rather as incitements to wasteful conflict and un-edifying chauvinism and that seems to be exactly what we don't need.

*Damascus,*  
2009





# Women of Syria

## Not to be Ignored

*Students in  
an Upper-  
Intermediate  
English  
class, British  
Council,  
Damascus,  
2005*



Below is a transcript of an interview conducted at the end of 2010, when there was no thought of conflict in Syria, and the issues of the day for educated young women related to their 'liberation'. The questions chosen were a response to the times since Ms Ayaan Hirsi Ali had recently visited Australia, where she was an outspoken critic of Islam, referring to the confrontation between the 'moral system' that she grew up in and the 'moral system' she

had adopted in the West. My experience of Islam in Syria did not correspond with the negative messages Ms Ali was imparting about mainstream Islam. She was presenting her version of a 'clash of civilizations'. For me, her worldview was skewed and it could not take us to a better place. However, so many of the women I met in Syria definitely could, given the chance.

– Susan Dirgham,

## Interview with Loubna, 32, a former student at the British Council. Damascus, November 2010

**Can you explain in what ways you are a typical Syrian woman?**

I don't think there is a 'typical' Syrian woman because being typical somehow tends to stereotype the woman, or each individual, so I don't think there is a typical Australian, a typical New Zealander, or a typical Syrian. I think that each individual is the product of his environment and of his characteristics, individual characteristics, so there isn't a typical Syrian man or woman.

**Many people in Australia believe that Islam is a violent religion and a religion which oppresses women. Can you comment on that?**

As for being a violent religion, I don't think Islam is violent as a religion itself. It's a belief that many different people believe in, but I don't think you can describe it as a violent

belief or religion because fanatics or extremists exist in each and every religion: Judaism, Christianity, even in the Sikh religion, so it is not a question that is restricted to one religion. It's the person who gives some of his individual characteristics to the belief itself. That's what I think. I don't think it really oppresses women because after all, with Islam, what is important is your relation with God. There is this thing in Islam, no-one can ask you if you are a believer or not. For example, no one in the street can come up to you and ask, "Are you a believer in God or not?" It is between you and God, and you only and God only will know about that. So, as for oppression towards women, no, I don't think that is the case. It is just that the social aspects of Islam that say you are a Muslim country are prevalent somehow, but not that prevalent. So if you are speaking about the hijab, I don't think that is oppression to the



woman. It's a choice, most of the time, taken by a woman after a long thought-process, a lot of soul searching from the woman's side. Sometimes there is the social aspect to it. [So it is worn] to fit into society, like Australian women dress freely, so if you wear a hijab, you will be easily singled out of the crowd. Sometimes it is a way to fit into your society. Sometimes it is really worn after deep soul-searching, and because you believe you have to wear a hijab.

**What are some of the differences between the lives of women in the various communities in the Middle East?**

There is a big difference. The media tends to stereotype all the Middle East. But there is not a single community, not a single society in the Middle East. Each country has its characteristics which are reflected in the lives of people, so I don't think there is one identity for the whole Middle East. Again there is no typical Syrian, and there is no typical Middle Eastern society. So people differ in the Arabic dialect they speak, in the way they dress, in the way they interact, in the way they eat, in the way they communicate with other people. When you are speaking about the differences between the countries in the Middle East, it is like you are speaking about the differences in the English-speaking world. So you have Britain, you have New Zealand, you have Australia, you have the United States, you have Canada. So it is a whole range of countries and social structures. There is a big variety, and you have a whole spectrum of livelihoods, of traditions.

**There seems to be a much stronger sense of community in Syria and a much greater focus on family. Do you think that is a fair observation?**

I think that is a fair observation because in the Western world generally the main unit in the society is the individual, but here it is the nuclear family: the father, the mother and the kids. So whatever approach you are going to have to a society, you have to build on the nucleus of that society, and here [Damascus] it is the family.

**What do you think are some of the conservative attitudes in regard to the relations between the sexes that could change without threatening the unity of the community and the 'health' of the family?**

Again, you are speaking about a community in general, but each part of Syria has its certain social unique[ness], you can say. For example, people from Damascus, but I'm not speaking ... it depends on the family. For example, my family is conservative in its own way. Maybe my friend's family might be conservative in some other way. For example, speaking about conservatism and relations between sexes, my friends from university used to come over to visit me while my parents were in the house, and they were more than welcome, not only my friends, male and female, but the friends of my older brother, also. This might not sound conservative to other people, but for my family what would be 'unconservative' would be for my male friends to come over while my parents are not there, if I am sitting alone. But it doesn't depend on being conservative. It is something to do with the traditions and the acceptable social behavior in a society. So I don't classify it under 'conservative'. I classify it under, for example, when you go in Australia or the Western world, when you go to a house that you enter for the first time, and you are invited for dinner or lunch. You bring some little token of appreciation to the house you are going into.



*High school student visiting the Krak des Chevaliers, Syria 2010*

So it is not being conservative or not. It is more about the acceptable, social manners or behavior. This is how I look at it. Again, being conservative varies from one family to the other, as I told you.

**In regard to women's issues and the equality of the sexes, what are some of the differences of opinion in Syria?**

You have a whole range of opinions. For example, men are demanding their rights, like to be equal to the women! They are saying, like, women have more rights than men. Or some say, 'Oh, no, we have lots of things to work on'. So you have the two extremes and in-between. For example, men say women in Syria get maternity leave, but men don't get [paternity leave]. So that is a big issue here, especially for newly established families, and the man wants to spend some time with his new-born baby, [something] men don't have the chance to do here in Syria. But some of the people who want more rights for women [acknowledge] there is so much to do, especially when it comes to social liberation, but then I think when it comes to social liberation, it is not going to come like this, in an instant. [Loubna clicks her fingers]. It is not going [to be as simple as a woman saying] okay, I'm going to take off this hijab and I'm going to dress freely. It's not like this. I think the Western world went through many phases in order to reach this stage. So I don't think [avoiding] stages of development, if you can call it 'development', according to the Western concept of development, it's no good to [avoid] them. It will not be normal 'development'. It will be like forcing a society to



English  
class, British  
Council,  
Damascus,  
circa 2005,  
with their  
teacher,  
co-editor  
Susan  
Dirgham



change 180 degrees. And apart from that, Europe took this long process to get to where it is right now. It did it out of its choice. It was not forced on it, so that is the main thing. If you are going to force me to do something, I will feel reluctant, even if I am open to the idea.

**So women in Syria aren't waiting for the West to save them?**

I'm sorry to disappoint the West. No. You know each one of us has his or her battles. Each one of us fights his or her demons. So we will do the fighting. We are strong enough.

**What is your philosophy of life?**

I never, ever, bothered to think about a philosophy of life. Okay, but I can tell you something about the way I look at life. Life is not easy, but you have to accept it as it is. You have to try to make the best of it on individual, professional, family, and social levels. That is the main thing. Again, you cannot control your life. You hope for things, you work for things, but after all, you can't really control your life because there are other things that happen outside of your immediate control that [whether] you like it or not will affect your life directly. But it is not about sitting back and complaining about those changes or about those, what do you call it, those factors that affect your life. It's okay, this is what I have. I have to do the best I can do with what I have right now. So it is just like, concentrate on what you have, and don't worry.

**Islam, from what I understand, means submission. Is that linked to what you have been saying to a certain extent?**

I think so in a way, although I didn't think of it in religious [terms]. But especially in the area I come from, in Syria or the Middle East, there are like certain things that come not from your direct environment but from your indirect environment and they could really affect your life and livelihood. You name it. For example, in the 80s, we were under embargo, and it was a big problem, but what could we do about it? It [affected] all of us. It wasn't against me as an individual, you know. So, okay, I have to cope with it. I have to work on developing what I have. I have to rely on what I have, the strength that I have, apart from the things that I am missing which are really important, but on the other hand, I have to really focus on what I have.

**Do you believe people have a lot of inherent power and resilience?**

Yes, I believe this. When I lived in the U.S. for two years, I found that people are so accustomed to certain stuff in their daily lives that we here consider as luxuries. For example, there are no electricity outages, but here, from time to time, we have some. But nonetheless we continue our daily lives. We will be affected, but we will minimize the [extent] of the effect. Yes, so I think people are resilient, and people know how to cope with their daily life in a very competent way.



# Voices of Syrians

From Syria and Abroad

## 1. Susan, 35, an English teacher from Ras El-Ayen Al-Hasakah, left Syria in 2012, now living in Italy

### What makes you proud to be Syrian?

I'm proud to be Syrian because Syria has been always an important country since the beginning of humanity.

### Syria is a secular country. Can you explain what this means to a non-Syrian?

As a Christian, I can say that in Syria I lived the same life I'm living in Italy and I had the same freedom. In Syria, everyone there could live the way they wanted, to practise their religion, to wear the clothes they chose.

### What does the concept of personal freedom mean to you? What about political freedom?

Personal freedom for me is when everyone can live the way they choose, to worship who they want, pray the way they like, dress in a way that makes them feel good, but always without interfering in the freedom of others. Political freedom is being able to live free from the force of others when we have different political points of view.

### What have you learnt about life, people and yourself since the start of the crisis?

I'm so sad for the tragic end to which children, innocent people and intelligent youth have suffered. In Syria now, there is only death, poverty and sadness.

### What can fill you with despair?

I despair seeing innocent people dying everyday in a very cruel way. I despair seeing young people leaving Syria everyday.

### What can give you hope?

I have hope knowing how strong Syrians are and how much they love Syria.

### How do you find the courage to go on and stay sane in the face of great hardship and pain?

If I watched all the types of crimes happening against my people, it would definitely make me insane, and maybe shake my faith. For this reason, I don't follow the daily news.

### Can you talk about the freedoms women have enjoyed in Syria?

Women in Syria are equal to men; they have the same rights, can work in all fields, can dress how they want and can move freely everywhere.

### How can political problems, such as corruption and nepotism, best be tackled?

Corruption can be tackled by offering a good life to all the population, applying strict rules on everyone who is corrupt, without discrimination, teaching children at school the values of life, and giving equal opportunities to all.

### What is your image of a new Syria?

I hope Syria can turn back to how it was with even more freedom and equality.

### Have you experienced anything since the start of the crisis you would like to recount?

In 2011, I was a teacher in Al Hasakeh. I was living with other teachers, Alawi and Sunni. Before the war everything was going well between us, but when the war started outside it started even inside, everyday stronger... life became intolerable, and I decided to go home. I took the train but for the first time in my life I was so scared; I couldn't stop crying till I arrived home. It was a big relief arriving home at that moment.

Local  
glassware,  
Straight  
Street,  
Damascus,  
2009





## 2. Maher, 28, a businessman from Homs, left Syria in 2015, now living in Sweden

### **What makes you proud to be Syrian?**

For me, being Syrian is an honor in itself. Syria is a traditional society with a long cultural history and Syrians have a taste for traditional arts and craft. We have contributed much to Arabic Literature and have a proud tradition of oral and written poetry. There is much else that makes me proud, such as the various religious festivals we celebrate, our TV dramas, the architecture, our cuisine and our sports men and women.

### **Syria is a secular country. Can you explain what this means to a non-Syrian?**

Syria was the only country in the Arab region that had 25 different sects. I believe it was the first secular country in the Middle East. The process of secularization in Syria began under the French Mandate in the 1920s and continued under different governments. The constitution guarantees freedom of religious expression to the various communities that include many Christian denominations. Political forms of Islam are not tolerated by the government. Syrian law is primarily based on civil law.

“Till now my country is losing its youth and is bleeding because of the Arab Spring.”

### **What does the concept of personal freedom mean to you?**

For me, what is needed to feel personal freedom is something essential inside me that allows me to behave, think, act, work and live freely. This thing is called self-confidence.

### **What about political freedom?**

About political freedom, this is to have the right to express freely my opinion about a party or the work of the government. It is to be able to join a specific party I support whose ideas I support. Political freedom means there are opportunities for everyone to work for the country and the society.

### **What have you learnt about life, people and yourself since the start of the crisis?**

I have learnt many things about life, such as our life is priceless but we can lose it because of the beliefs and faults of others. About people, people in my country have been divided into many groups and each group tries the best to remove the other ones from existence. About myself I've learnt that forgiveness is a gift I can give to myself. Patience, faith, hope and love are what can make miracles happen. In a very short time, the war destroyed my country and destroyed some evidence of its civilization and history. Five years of war has killed happiness and displaced children. In Syria, there is no childhood any more.

### **If there were such a thing as Utopia on earth, what form would it take, do you think?**

I think Utopia is an ideal place, especially in its social, political, and moral aspects. On earth Utopia means, in my opinion, that people can live without life's problems such as wars, poverty, and crime ... For Syrians today, this would seem like a Utopia: a heaven on earth.

### **What can fill you with despair?**

A lot of things fill me with despair, such as the days my country spends in fighting and people still killing each other. When we live without laws to respect and prevent this kind of life, then the civil life turns into a bloody life.

### **What can give you hope?**

Love and honesty between humans still gives me hope that there will be a return to peace.

### **How do you find the courage to go on and stay sane in the face of great hardship and pain?**

Courage comes from inside the heart and mind. It enables us to go and face life. The determination to stay alive is the source of courage to face the pain. Nothing can shake my faith because I believe in God and I have a big faith in a better future and in a better life.

### **Can you talk about the freedoms women have enjoyed in Syria?**

Women in Syria are more respected and have more rights than women in any other Arab country. Women are usually well educated. They had the freedom to choose a suitable career. They make up a significant percentage of the work force. Most teachers are women. Other common occupations for women are doctors, nurses, workers in clothing factories, and engineers. Also some of them take part in political life and have become government ministers.

### **How can political problems, such as corruption and nepotism, best be tackled?**

Freedom of information and pluralism in the media are essential preconditions for making public opinion fully aware of the serious threat posed by corruption and ensuring that political corruption can be exposed by journalists in a climate of freedom and independence. About nepotism, is to fix the work environment and no one should be allowed to replace who has a high degrees of education with those who are relatives.

### **What is your image of a new Syria?**

I've got a beautiful image of a new Syria, but to create a beautiful new Syria several steps would have to be followed. First initiate a major re-structuring of the economy to raise productivity. Then improve the universal healthcare. Then grant scholarships to the most gifted students to study at overseas universities so they can then return to Syria to be sailors to lead the ship to the right port. Finally, the culture of murder and killing has to be replaced by a culture that emphasizes learning and studying, and a culture that ensures people respect each other and there is social justice for everyone.



### 3. Lina, 43, from Homs, a volunteer working with people who have special needs

#### Have you experienced anything since the start of the crisis you would like to recount?

Before the beginning of the Syrian crisis and the war, my family, which consists of four persons, lived peacefully in our lovely city Homs. But with the beginning of the war, we were affected by a kind of despair and constant fear. I became afraid about my children going to school after explosions hit schools and killed children and childhood. Blood colored the streets. The sound of gunfire and rockets prevented us from sleeping, night and day. As every day passed, life became almost impossible. We couldn't get food for my children; my husband lost his job, and his brother was kidnapped; we paid a big ransom to get him back. Everything became expensive - that is, if there was anything to buy. There was no water, no electricity and there was no

kind of healthcare. Disease spread dramatically because of the dead bodies that filled the streets. We used to sleep and wake up under the threat of death. We tried to hold on till the last moment. But after we lost everything, we decided to move to safety in another area. We moved to Mashta Al Helo . We rented a small apartment; it was very expensive for us. My husband and I looked for any kind of job just to earn a living, but we found nothing. Then as we were displaced and we were poor, my husband registered the family with the Red Cross so we could get a monthly subsidy that consisted of different foodstuffs and some medicines. For now we are still in this little village but our future is unknown, uncertain. After everything has gone with the wind, we pray just to stay alive and ask God to protect the Syrian people. My only hope is this war ends immediately.

Poster advertising a Lena Chamamyan concert at Mustafa Ali's Gallery, Old City, Damascus, 2009; Sculpture in background is by Mustafa Ali





## 4. Najah, 48, a female teacher in Al Hasaka

### **What makes you proud to be Syrian?**

I am proud that Syria still exists on the political map of the world.

### **Syria is a secular country. Can you explain what this means to a non-Syrian?**

For me, secularism means living together in the same land, speaking the same language while having different beliefs and religions. Our beliefs are a private matter, and at the same time we all believe in scientific progress.

### **What does the concept of personal freedom mean to you?**

Personal freedom is to live, to settle, to receive medical care, and to practise one's religion without having any negative impact on anyone.

### **What about political freedom?**

Political freedom is the freedom to express my opinion about my country's development, talking about the negative gaps without any problem, without causing hatred or rancor.

### **What have you learnt about life, people and yourself since the start of the crisis?**

I have learnt to be loyal to my country despite all the difficulties.

### **Have you experienced anything since the start of the crisis you would like to recount?**

Since the start of the crisis in Syria, I have noticed how some respond to an opinion with intolerance without knowing what is really happening, just because they are following someone. This is when the truth is lost.

### **What can fill you with despair?**

What fills me with despair is seeing what is happening to Syrians and their country, from the killing, destruction and dispersal.

### **What can give you hope?**

What fills me with hope is that I can still talk about the beautiful Syria, the sweet memories and the safety we felt; this gives me the strength to go on.

### **How do you find the courage to go on and stay sane in the face of great hardship and pain?**

What enables me to find the courage to go on and stay sane? My faith in God, my love for Syrians, and despite all the difficulties I can still walk, work and dream, and life goes on.

### **Has there been an information war against Syria?**

Yes, there has been an information war against Syria. This is what the days have revealed.

### **Can you talk about the freedoms women have enjoyed in Syria?**

Syrian women had unlimited freedom till certain parties entered and deformed all the features of this sacred freedom.

### **How can political problems, such as corruption and nepotism, best be tackled?**

The best way to deal with problems such as corruption is for all parties to sit at the dialogue table and give opinions with full transparency and sincerity, without sectarian discrimination and with the determination to do what is good for all.

### **What is your image of a new Syria?**

Syria will be the strong authentic Syria once more.

*“In Syria, the Arab Spring has been received with general indignation.”*

### **If there were such a thing as Utopia on earth, what form would it take, do you think?**

The best version of a Utopia that can exist is when people respect their fellow humans and work together to achieve progress in all fields.

*Umayyad Mosque, Damascus*





## 5. Bahnan, a businessman, aged 59, now living in Al-Qamishli, Syria

**Syria is a secular country. Can you explain what this means to a non-Syrian?**

If anyone visited Syria, they could see with their own eyes the freedom of belief, the different nationalities, the respect for everyone and the equality of men and women in all fields of life.

**What does the concept of personal freedom mean to you?**

Personal freedom means respecting others regardless of their religion, nationality, ethnicity, or their intellectual and social level.

**Have you experienced anything since the start of the crisis you would like to recount?**

I have seen how people were slaughtered for personal grudges, and so helping the plot to go on.

“The ‘Arab Spring’ has been an autumn that harvests humans.”

**What can fill you with despair?**

Despair can fill the hearts of people when they see the domination of the tribal society on the elections, when quantity is chosen over quality.

**What can give you hope?**

What gives me hope is that the people accept the necessities and most simple things.

**How do you find the courage to go on and stay sane in the face of great hardship and pain?**

I find courage by doing only the most necessary things to live. And thinking about immigration gave me the strength to go on. But, honestly, losing safety and security have had their effect on shaking my faith.

**Can you talk about the freedoms women have enjoyed in Syria?**

Women have freedom in all fields of life: political, economic, military and social fields, including work.

**How can political problems, such as corruption and nepotism, best be tackled?**

Political problems can best be tackled by resurrection and rebirth and followed up with the application of gods and angels.

**What is your image of a new Syria?**

A new Syria for me will see the disappearance of hatred and the failure of the plot to destroy it. Syria will remain on its feet. It will be different, and slowly it will be rebuilt because of its fearless people, and many of those who left will turn back to their homes.

*Al-Nofara  
Café,  
Old City,  
Damascus,  
2009*





## 6. Iyad, male, mid-30s, a ‘new’ journalist, living in Damascus

*To be very honest, the so-called “Arab Spring” fooled a majority of Syrians! Many of them recognized sooner or later that the media deceived them and that what has been happening wasn’t really initiated by the people, but rather orchestrated by foreign powers, while others still believe in the “Arab Spring” even now!*

**What makes me proud to be Syrian include the following:**

- Our ancient human civilization that goes back thousands of years
- The ethnic and religious diversity and the relatively secular society that has been put at risk in this war.

**Syria is a secular country. Can you explain what this means to a non-Syrian?**

Well, although Syria is still not secular in its constitution and laws (because the society and public opinion are still not mature enough to accept a secular state), the secular values that do exist in Syria mean, for instance, that it’s unacceptable in Syria to ask an acquaintance about their sect. There are plenty of Syrian villages where different sects live together and share their feasts and festive occasions.

*“I would say that the situation in Syria is more deeply rooted than the so-called Arab Spring.”*

**What does the concept of personal freedom mean to you?**

Personal freedom to me means:

- To believe, or disbelieve, in whatever ideas I choose to without being afraid or intimidated
- To choose the lifestyle that I like
- To be free to dress in public as I choose (this freedom is especially important for women)
- To be free to have a girlfriend (also for girls to have a boyfriend) and to be able to live together without being intimidated by the society and without having to meet in secret as if we’re committing a crime or a shameful act
- As a journalist, to be able to film and take photographs in public places without needing to get permission in advance.

**As for political freedom, it means:**

- To be free to believe and practice a political ideology that I support and to be able to declare it in public without being afraid
- To be able to criticize (but not to insult) any person, party or institution without being afraid.

**What have you learnt about life, people and yourself since the start of the crisis?**

About life, I’ve learnt that humankind is still far below the level of fine and ethical civilization!

**Have you experienced anything since the start of the crisis you would like to recount?**

I’d like to talk about the fact that all Syrian people are suffering economically because of the embargo imposed by the so-called “friends of the Syrian people”, that is, the U.S., U.K., E.U., Saudi Arabia, Qatar and their allies.

I work as freelance TV journalist for an international media company. I produce only one story per month. It was a year after I started this work before I could receive my wages. This was because I couldn’t receive any bank transfer from the company due to the embargo imposed on Syria. I had to find a third party, a non-Syrian living in Beirut who I could trust and who could receive the payment for me. Then I had to find somebody to bring it from Beirut to Damascus. It takes more than a month sometimes!

So, being Syrian, whether pro- or anti-Assad, whether Muslim, Christian or even atheist, is a reason to be banned by the “friends of the Syrian people”!

Of course, this is not as tragic as the countless stories of abduction, loss of a loved one, displacement and other disasters that almost every family in Syria has been subject to, once or more during this bitter war.

However, I want to highlight the point that the very countries that complain about the flow of refugees, are in fact continuing to push Syrians to flee their country.

I know many Syrians who have fled to Europe, neither because of the Islamic State, nor because of the “regime” or the rebels, but very simply because they’ve lost their jobs and are unable to afford life due to the deteriorating economy.

Almost everything related to business with the outside is banned for a Syrian! Even the most trivial matters, such as updating your flash player, Skype or Google Play online! You’ll get a polite message saying: “Sorry! You’re in an embargoed country!” or at best: “Thank you for your interest with our product, but this service is unavailable in your country!”

Well, I understand too well that Western governments dislike President Assad, but they claim that they are supporting the Syrian people!

You may say: “They want to punish Syrians who are pro-Assad”, but the irony is that even those who are anti-Assad will suffer the same if they’re living in Syria!

This means that what Western politicians are saying in the media about supporting the Syrian people is a kind of hypocrisy and the fact is they don’t really care!

**What can fill you with despair?**

What fills me with despair is to realize that humans still behave like beasts that enjoy torturing and killing each other,

What fills me with despair is to realize that the culture of hatred is the dominant culture.



What fills me with despair is to realize that people can be easily brainwashed.

In such a world, there is reason to feel very sorry for Humanity.

**What can give you hope?**

What gives me hope is the fact that the majority of Syrian people are aware of (most of) these deficit points..

A significant percentage of Syrians believe in Syria, regardless of any ethnic or sectarian issues.

A significant percentage of Syrians believe in humanity.

What also gives me hope is to realize that we're not alone! To see that we have friends all over the world who feel compassion for us, a compassion that is not driven by the mainstream media, but a compassion that is based on knowledge of the reasons behind the targeting of Syria.

**How do you find the courage to go on and stay sane in the face of great hardship and pain?**

What gives me the motivation and the momentum to go on despite the great hardship and pain is that I have a message;

I have a message. I have aimed to tell the truth since the media turned the murderer into a victim and the victim into a murderer!

I have a message to tell the world that a majority of Syrians are civilized despite the media depiction of Syrian people as thugs who are either Jihadi lunatics or bloody murderers.

I have a message to tell the world that the majority of Syrians love life and have minds that are open to loving the whole of humanity.

My faith has never been shaken. What gives me more confidence and faith is when I see people around the world who have recognized the truth despite the dirty media campaign. They courageously stand by us.

**Can you talk about the freedoms women have enjoyed in Syria?**

Women in Syria, along with women in both Lebanon and Tunisia, are the most free in the Arab world. Women in these countries have the higher degree of equality and status - in respect to men - in the Arab world.

However, I still don't believe that this is enough! There are still traditions which can limit the freedom of women. For instance, young women are usually not allowed to stay outdoors after a certain hour in the evening if they're alone, while young men are almost free to. Most girls/women are still too afraid to go out with a boy/man alone (as a couple), unless they are among a group of friends.

Nevertheless, women in Syria can have a job in almost all fields. They can become parliamentarians, even government ministers, as well as CEO's of companies and institutions, or even army officers.

**How can political problems, such as corruption and nepotism, best be tackled?**

Such problems are almost too hard to be eradicated! I believe, they can't be uprooted simply with strict laws, because there will always be those who bribe the police and even the judges! In the long-term, corruption and nepotism can only be eradicated through education.

*Out and about  
one weekend,  
Syria, 2009*





## 7. Nawar, male, aged 34, an engineer from Tartous, now living in Germany

### **What makes you proud to be Syrian?**

I feel proud to be Syrian because I believe we have a special stable identity however much we shift from one place to another. Our identity is represented by the way we interact, engage, behave and move towards a vision. It does not relate to the material things we have. From a vision perspective, I am proud because I believe we mostly have several visions that directly relate to the surrounding conditions and leads to one essential goal, which is to survive. As for how we work toward our goals, I believe Syrians should be proud to have the ability to be interdependent and use all the intelligence they have to even create new behavior, make their own new rules at any time to adapt to any condition and achieve their vision even if it is just survival, while managing social interaction and ongoing happiness. The current crisis is a shining example, where I realize Syrians could rapidly make mindset changes to adapt to critical situations and at least survive. And they are doing it really good. Even Syrians who have the opportunity to live a long way from war zones, they would work with development visions on the long term not only on the short-time horizon of survival.

### **How has the 'Arab Spring' been received in Syria?**

I would say that the condition in Syria is more deeply rooted to believe it's just a part of a rival event like the Arab spring. The complexity of events and the number of hands playing a role before and at the moment leads more to a very old systematic disruption due to multiple interests and beliefs, planned and decided long time ago. And that was seen by rational minds in Syria at the beginning.

### **Syria is a secular country. Can you explain what this means?**

It depends on the perspective and background of non-Syrians. In terms of religion, some cultures would look at the country as not respecting religious purposes of life which makes our people infidels in their point of view. However, with others it could mean we are free-minded, always aim on development and achieving goals under modern conditions and can easily integrate with other cultures like what's currently happening in Germany.

### **What does the concept of personal freedom mean to you?**

I would see personal freedom as being able to do what fulfils our needs, minds well and achieve our vision. As for political freedom, it of course integrates with personal freedom in having the right to choose who would allocate resources and lead for development in all sectors. And also having the right to participate publically in the formation of policy so that our personal freedom and needs are achieved without causing harm to the function of the dynamic development of environment.

### **What have you learnt about life, people and yourself since the start of the crisis?**

I have learnt that in any system of communities, if the communities didn't interact and integrate smoothly and harmonically under one united goal, there would definitely be a conflict. This conflict could be solved either with reconsidering notions and rules to integrate, total isolation,

or actually violence. This is where strong interconnected education plays a big role. Human mindset has a crucial role in understanding the way things work, and if it's not well prepared and has the opportunity to engage in finding logical solutions, then violence could easily become the choice where the weakest would follow the strongest in their communities to protect them from violence either by local communities themselves or external ones. In other words, better education from a long time ago would have led to a better solution. As for what has the crisis done to Syria including Syrians in other parts of the world, I could describe that as what happens to billiard balls when they take a strong hit and isolate.

### **What is your view of Utopia?**

I don't think I can imagine like the Greek did. We still haven't reached a limit that we could measure how would that be while the world is interconnected and we have been living a long lasting conflict for a long time. However, I can just say it would be a place where human mind is respected and classified according to what they actually do for a sustainable development and get rewarded for it. I can also say that utopia would be a place formed so that all species could utilize nature according to their needs without conflicts and leaving a capacity enough for coming generations.

### **Have you experienced anything since the start of the crisis you would like to relate?**

Since I haven't lived or stayed in Syria for a long time ago, I haven't had any direct experience within the crisis. However, I am having one indirect experience which is more difficulty to reunite with my family.

### **What can give you hope?**

In short, what can spray my guts with hope is someone of power who starts speaking of a logical solution that doesn't provoke violence against a specific party or community. Going back to the 1st question of how I am proud to be Syrian, I would say that I have faith in my people that at some point in time horizon after a long period of conflict and violence, new generations will wipe the dust out of the country for more absolute re-development.

### **How do you find the courage to go on and stay sane?**

The answer of this question could be integrated from question 1, 7 & 10. One maybe cannot be able to stay sane, but could find a way to move on, adapt and self-develop to stay at least ready for coming opportunities. Thinking always of the problem itself without the essential cause and a solution to prevent it is always indeed a way for insanity; I believe the free human mind is always able to manipulate thoughts and find different forms of faith.

### **Is Syria the victim of an information war?**

Information war is happening all over the world. I could just say Syria could be a victim of it.

### **Can you talk about the freedoms women have enjoyed in Syria?**

I believe that women in the MENA region all lack freedom of decision making when it comes to their future. As for



personal freedom, I could say that in Syria, most of the women at least enjoy being able to choose their career and work locally, raise their children according to what they see the best, interact socially with others and enjoy the beauty of their surrounding Nature. Of course in different levels depending on religious constraints. I could say however, that we still need a lot to understand more about the value of women and their actual role even if we already have existing special cultural values of women in Syria.

**How can political problems such as corruption and nepotism best be tackled?**

Corruption could be a way of adapting to survive for some people, therefore I would see the best solution is to reconsider transparency and public participation within policy. Nepotism could be an integrated effect of corruption and misallocation of resources. Referring to my answer in question 10, the one who would tackle this problem is someone of power who solves problem seeking absolute development with no favor for a specific party to benefit from. Otherwise the conflict will rise again and lead for both corruption and nepotism.

**What is your image of a new Syria?**

It's not so easy to give a specific image because in my stock of information, there're no clear inputs that give me a specific projection of it. However, according to what I know there are two different possibilities and in both possibilities, there are best case and worst case scenarios. The 1st possibility is isolation under an international agreement which projects an image of Syria as separated states, each lead by certain parties involved and start developing by exchanging resources with allies. The best case scenario

here is that people in each state will focus on development independently with minimized conflicts. But this could be difficult of course because to some people this will still be losing a property that has been developing for a long time ago and they became part of it, therefore it might not be easy to give it up and that gives the bad image of isolated states with ongoing conflicts and could still has the status of civil war. As for the other possibility, it's a one side winning by the owners of the property as they have stronger motivation to stabilize the situation who are "The Syrian Army". The best case is that the area will become safer, people will focus only on redevelopment of the country as a whole, Syrians who were living abroad would go back to use all what they have learned and achieved in there career to reconstruct properties from infrastructure to end-user services. But this still seem like a faraway happy ending; this will mean assuming all opposing parties have been isolated in agreement to move outside the country, it means that local communities who were opposing each other have decided to whip out the past and focus on reconstruction so that means the country would be developing on a rational pathway. Any of the mentioned scenarios not happening would leave the worst case scenario of continuous instability even if the end of war was officially pronounced. I would want to believe that there might be a time where conflicts have ended or at least minimized and people start thinking with absolute rationality focusing on reconstruction and development to recover the country's heart beats. And as I mentioned in question 1, Syrians are able to rapidly create new mindsets for adapting new conditions but the question is when will we realize a 1st step to a peaceful development-oriented condition for Syrians to adapt.

*Locals at Beit Jabri, a popular restaurant in Old City, Damascus, 2009*





## 8. Samar, female, aged 28, working with a humanitarian organisation, recently moved from Aleppo to Tartous

### What makes you proud to be Syrian?

Sometimes I feel shame when I see the crimes that some Syrians are doing in the name of God, but when I remember how Syria used to be and how the Syrian people are facing this crisis and how they build hope and life from the ashes I feel so proud to be one of these people.

### Syria is a secular country. Can you explain what this means to a non-Syrian?

Syria cannot be completely secular because religion prevents it from being completely secular

### What does the concept of personal freedom mean to you? What about political freedom?

There was personal freedom before the war; if you compare the previous freedom people had in Syria with what they have now you will realize how much freedom they used to have. Regarding political freedom, it relates to personal freedom in some ways. But people who are interested in politics should be asked this question.

### What have you learnt about life, people and yourself since the start of the crisis?

This war destroyed people's dreams and made them abandon their homeland and be humiliated. For me I've lost my enthusiasm and I've become sad and it's hard for me to be happy again because at any happy moment I remember what happened to my country and return to being sad again.

### Have you experienced anything since the start of the crisis you would like to recount?

Yes, I've lost a lot like most of the people in Syria but I'm not going to recount the story of my loss because I don't want anyone to feel pity for me, we can start all over again and even be better than how we used to be.

### What can fill you with despair? What gives you hope?

When I take a look to Syria's past and return to see its present I feel despair. When I see despair in the eyes of a little child who needs to work now in order to live instead of being in school with other children I feel great despair, but when I see the Syrian people are facing all that is happening bravely I feel that there is hope.

### How do you find the courage to go on and stay sane in the face of great hardship and pain?

My faith is shaken when I see innocent people dying for no reason but I still believe that this war is coming to an end and that's what keeps me sane. And when I see mothers who have lost their children stay sane they give me strength and make me feel that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

### Is there an information war against Syria?

Of course there is. We are in Syria and we know what is really happening here, they made up many of fake news on TV and social media. Sometimes they exaggerate some news and sometimes they marginalize others according to the benefits of the parties they support.

### Can you talk about the freedoms women have enjoyed in Syria?

Women in Syria have freedom but their freedom is limited according to religion traditions and education. Women in Syria can work in most domains that men work in; they can vote; they can study at school and university; they can travel. The freedom women in Syria enjoy is related to their education.

### How can corruption and nepotism be tackled?

First every corrupted person should be tried, and punished for what they did. Everyone should be given rights, and the right person should be put in the right place.

### What is your image of a new Syria?

The image of new Syria is a free country and its people believe that your religion belongs to you only and that Syria is for every Syrian who loves their country.

Left:  
Mahardah,  
June 2014  
(Anonymous  
photographer)



Right: Jesus  
Minaret,  
Umayyad  
Mosque,  
Damascus,  
2009





# The Challenge

## Responding to this 21st Century War

This magazine aims to present the perspectives of Syrians who have experience of the war in their country and who wish Syria to remain united and secular.

Few deny that there is a proxy war being fought in Syria. Pope Francis has contended that the world is at war, pointing out that it is 'not a war of religion', but

*a war of interests. There is a war for money. There is a war for natural resources. There is a war for the domination of peoples.*

21st century alliances, technology and media will determine much of the war's scope, stratagem and propaganda. But there are truths on war that never date. In the 18th century, Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian general and military theorist, wrote, 'War is merely the continuation of policy by other means', while in the following century, Friedrich Nietzsche claimed that 'the best weapon against an enemy is another enemy'. Both assertions may well apply to the current war in Syria.

Responding to war will always be a challenge as the fog of war never entirely lifts and the war games never abate, just as the horrors and insanity that war brings in its path have the potential to unhinge all who are impacted by it. It is the highest risk game countries can play.



*Scenes in  
Old City,  
Damascus, 2009  
(Sculpture by  
Mustafa Ali)*





# 'My Country'

– by Nizar Qabbani,  
– translated by Norma Medawar

From the lisp of the blackbird...	من لثغة الشرور ..
From the saddening huskiness of the flute...	من بحة ناي محزنه ..
From the flickering sounds of the folk songs	من رجفة الموال ..
From the sighs of the minaret...	من تنهدات المنذنه ..
From a cloud at sunset woven by a chimney and by the wound of the bricks of the decorated and widespread villages...	من غيمة تحبكها عند الغروب المدخنه وجرح قرميد القرى المنشورة المزينه ..
From the whispers of a star settled in our east	من وشوشات نجمة في شرقنا مستوطنه
From a story between a rose and a lily	من قصة تدور بين وردة .. وسوسنه
From the gasp of a woodcutter returning with a weary axe	ومن لهاث حاطب عاد بفأس موهنه ..
The sparrow is delighted to build his nest among us	يطيب للعصفور أن يبني لدينا مسكنه ..
And the willow trees spin their homes in the brooklets	ويغزل الصفصاف .. في حضن السواقي موطنه
Our boundaries are protected by jasmine and dew drops	حدودنا بالياسمين والندى محصنه
Our flowers are blossoming like coloured thoughts...	ووردنا مفتح كالفكر الملونه ..
In my country the rocks are in love, and the vines are addicted	وعندنا الصخور تهوى والدوالي مدمنه
Our country was there... and all times came after it.	بلادنا كانت .. وكانت بعد هذا الأزمنه ..



# Damascus

## A type of immortality

*I remember the Damascene houses  
With their copper doorknobs  
And their ceilings decorated with glazed tiles  
And their interior courtyards  
That remind you of descriptions of heaven...*

– Nizar Qabbani, from 'Damascus, what are you doing to me?'

▲ Courtyard in  
a traditional  
Arabic house



▲ Copper doorknob

The balcony  
at Beit Jabri ▶



◀ Mirror and furniture,  
traditional Arabic home



Restaurant  
signs ▶



◀ The Real  
Love' in a  
Damascus  
lane



The entrance  
to the Souq  
al-Hamidiya ▶



*To Damascus, years are only  
moments, decades are only  
flitting trifles of time. She  
measures time not by days and  
months and years, but by the  
empires she has seen rise and  
prosper and crumble to ruin.  
She is a type of immortality.*

– Mark Twain, from 'The Innocents Abroad'



# To Readers

As there are over 23 million Syrians in the world, the majority of them still in Syria, a huge range of voices could be presented in *Beloved Syria – Considering Syrian Perspectives*. In an effort to be as inclusive as possible, we have tried to avoid contentious political stands and instead considered what unites Syrians.

We hope the images and voices bring Syria and its people alive. Like other peoples, Syrians are united by common human values that can light up the heart and provide hope and joy.

In extreme circumstances, such as the conflict in Syria, unfettered hope and joy are in short supply. In wars, a beast can be released from the human heart. However, so, too, can an angel.

This issue of the magazine points to Syria's rich history, the diversity of its population, the beauty of Syria, the love Syrians have for their country, and the strength and power of Syria's women. There is a life force in women that can't easily be crushed.

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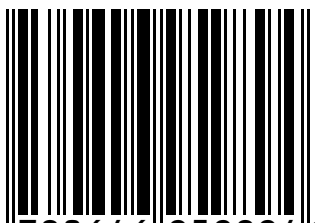
Interview with Loubna, Damascus, November 2010

## **So women in Syria aren't waiting for the West to save them?**

*I'm sorry to disappoint the West. No. You know each one of us has his or her battles. Each one of us fights his or her demons. So we will do the fighting. We are strong enough.*



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