

## **Nation in Conflict, Gender in Conflict. How do Syrian activists reflect on gender identities challenged by the civil war?**

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### **Abstract**

*Narratives of nation and gender identities intersect in many dimensions. In times of national conflict, they are re-negotiated, causing lasting change. This paper looks at Syria, as a case study. Calling for a feminist and post-colonial anthropology, voices of five Syrian women, speaking as political activists, are used as primary sources of research.*

**Keywords:** gender identity, nation, Syria

## **Nation in Konflikt, Gender in Konflikt. Wie reflektieren syrische Aktivistinnen durch den Bürgerkrieg infrage gestellte Geschlechtsidentitäten?**

### **Zusammenfassung**

*Narrative von Nation und Geschlechteridentitäten stehen in multidimensionalen Wechselbeziehungen. In Zeiten nationaler Konflikte werden diese Narrative neu erzählt und möglicherweise nachhaltig umgeschrieben. Dieses Paper betrachtet Syrien als ein aktuelles Fallbeispiel solcher Aushandlungen. Es ruft dazu auf, Anthropologie feministisch und postkolonial zu gestalten und stellt die Stimmen fünf syrischer Frauen, welche als politische Aktivistinnen sprechen, als primäre Forschungsquellen in den Fokus.*

**Schlagwörter:** Geschlechtsidentität, Nation, Syrien

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*Despite our differences, women's participation in the politics of Syria is a struggle within the struggle and we lead it. Some of my friends and some other Syrian women, they are sitting here, and they lead this fight every day. It's a long term struggle for us (Atlantic Council 2016: 6:32-6:55).*

This is how Bassma Kodmani, spokesperson of the Syrian High Negotiations Committee of the Syrian Opposition, began her speech at a debate on the Geneva peace talks and the future of Syria, in Washington, DC on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 2016. As a professor of political science, Kodmani has been an active member of the Syrian National Council since 2011 and a political activist opposing the Assad regime. When asked about the recent events and the stagnation of the peace talks, she argues the following:

*You see that the opposition has all along come along and cooperated with the international community and has been faced with no compliance from the regime; the latest being end of February. We committed, the groups on the ground committed, political opposition committed, and military groups on the ground committed to a cessation of hostilities – and that cessation of hostilities was then violated. Humanitarian aid should have been gone in! This is a resolution of the security council. Is it going in? The answer is 'no, we have to negotiate every convoy'. So in fact it is... who is going to implement on what is agreed? (Atlantic Council 2016: 9:14-10:00).*

As the Syrian nation is stuck in a state of crisis, so are Syrian gender identities. The relations and norms that construct such identities are being destroyed and renegotiated by different political and social players. Women in Syria are actively participating in this process. How do the constructs of nation and gender intersect in theory and what could this mean for the Syrian conflict? In trying to find answers to these questions, the argumentation of this paper follows three steps. Each step is composed by a theoretical statement and introduction to the inter-dependencies of nation and gender, and is followed by a comparison to the situation in Syria, supported by the quotes and perspectives of five Syrian activists. Their voices, like that of Kodmani, have been researched and used as primary sources in this paper. Before outlining the three step argumentation, the following paragraphs will explain this choice and provide further details on the research methods.

## 1. Working with Voices

“The story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else, no matter how gifted or well-intentioned”

– a famous quote by Chinua Achebe (1958/1980: 4). Investigating and representing people in other countries through science, journalism, politics, or aid work stands in a long tradition of rarely reflected imperialism, colonialism and racism. Anthropologists from the global North tend to believe in their own “automatic authority” and for centuries they have constructed people in the global South “as unable to speak for themselves, being primitive, pre-literate, without history” (Clifford/Marcus 1986: 10). Feminist anthropology sought out to research differing gender relations in different cultures, neglecting that the restricting images of women they knew should be the same everywhere or biologically inevitable (Moore 1994: 10). At the same time though, it has been constructing the idea of a uniting world-wide struggle of all women against all their male oppressors. Further, many feminist scientists and activists are still denying the importance of intersectional factors of discrimination, like race, class, or sexuality (cf. hooks 1982). Another construct feminist anthropology helped to shape, especially important for this article, is that of the suppressed and submissive *Arab Woman*. Pictures of women – veiled women – are often used to show the unchanging, historically back-wards Islam and to legitimize the seemingly emancipated *Western* feminists to free or unveil them through representation (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014).<sup>1</sup> Neither colonialism nor imperialist exploitation is denounced as back-wards and problematic by the *Western* feminist mainstream, but instead Islam is discursively constructed as “the villain” (Kongar et al. 2014: 19). In cases of war or conflict, “the weakened, dependent, and victimized 'womenandchildren' who populate mainstream accounts of complex emergencies and forced displacement are central to NGO campaigns designed to obtain political and humanitarian support” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014: 4). These images are political images that strongly influence the way people think about wars and conflicts. They further impact the types of actions to be taken (or not taken) and what will be demanded from politicians. In the year 2003, segments of feminist movements in different countries strongly

1 Dividing the world into *The West and The Others* remains one of the key problems made visible by, for example, postcolonial studies. However these terms are still widely established and appear in most of the literature that has been worked with here. To emphasize the questionable implications and the historical imperialism and racism included in these terms, they will be written in italic, if not quoted directly.

supported the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, seeking to liberate the oppressed *Arab Women* from their aggressive men. The *Arab Woman*, who in such discourses is always Muslim, is used as a political trope justifying “imperial presence in countries around the world by pointing to the need to save [her] from [her] oppressed existence” which can only ever be done by the “catalytic presence of ‘male’ Western political, social and economic ingenuity” (Kongar et al. 2014: 4-5). She herself is stripped of her agency and the outcomes of these narratives can have devastating consequences on her life.

Instead of speaking for others, a feminist postcolonial anthropology seeks to support women to speak for themselves, and listens to what they have to say (cf. Visweswaran 1994: 31). It denies the automatic authority of journalists, politicians and scientists, and argues for “experimental, polyphony, autobiographic, and other creative forms of representation” (Schein/Strasser 1997: 26, translation by the author). So where are the stories told directly by Syrian women themselves? Political scientists Marc Lynch et al. claim that “Syria's [conflict] has been the most socially mediated civil conflict in history. An exceptional amount of what the outside world knows [...] has come from videos, analysis, and commentary circulated through social networks” (2014: 1). Although this implies a great variety of anthropological research material, it is rarely being used for scientific purposes. This might be because most of the videos, pictures, writings, and comments are impossible to track back to their origins. Internet sources as such remain dubious and risky in the eyes of many social scientists, while information gathered in books and journals is believed to be more trustworthy. But accumulating material from field work has for years been impossible in Syria, and the few foreign journalists and activists in the area are struggling to paint a congruent picture (cf. Gerlach/Metzger 2013). When scanning through internet sources and particularly through YouTube channels, what one discovers are merely the “stories of revolution”, which are not necessarily trying to be objective but to do exactly that: tell a story (Selbin 2010). The British political scientist Reinoud Leenders, who has been working with these sources, argues that in the case of Syria it is absolutely necessary to do so, but at the same time the “digitalized storytelling of Syria's uprising should be equally, or perhaps especially treated with great care and, whenever possible, be considered with the aid of multiple alternative sources” (2013: 283).

For the research presented in this paper, YouTube footage was only used when other material – mostly newspaper articles and political websites – provided information on the woman, who is talking in the video, and her political agenda. Due to language barriers, the research has been restricted to English, German, and some French speaking sources. Most Syrian women that appear are either relatively fluent in one of these languages, or their statements have been translated. Bassma Kodmani, Samar Yazbek, Fadwa Soliman, Razan Zaitouneh and Mouna Ghanem are five Syrian activists, who have all been publicly known before the protests in 2011. Kodmani used to be a political science professor, Yazbek is an internationally well-known writer, Soliman had a career as one of the most famous Syrian actresses, Zaitouneh is a human rights lawyer, and Ghanem is a medical doctor and political activist. They have in particular been selected because of the possibility to listen to them speak online and because there are different sources providing more information about them. As the attempt is to research how gender identities change and are challenged through protest movements and warfare, the selection emphasizes women whose voices were heard more than once during the years of struggle. Under these limiting conditions there was not much variety to choose from. This makes it very important to keep in mind that these women can neither represent a majority of Syrian women, nor of Syrian activists, for various reasons. Very few voices of women supporting the Assad regime, the self-called Islamic State, or other fundamentalist religious opposition groups, or of women who are not politically involved, were accessible, or able to fulfill the conditions laid out above. Yazbek and Soliman are both living in exile in Paris and have been talking about their experiences fleeing their home country to avoid detention or worse. Their accounts can not speak for or represent the millions of Syrian refugees, whose stories and experiences have also not been included in this paper. It can therefore only be a beginning and maybe an inspiration to collect more material, i.e. to do more research and translation work and to ask for and listen to more voices of Syrian women in future research projects and journalism – as well as to provide more platforms where Syrian women can actually represent themselves. Women in Syria have been creating a whole discursive body of media material, presenting new concepts of gender identity, which could be used when organizing a post-revolutionary society. These records are expressions and products of the gender re-negotiations

taking place and making them accessible has put some of these women in great danger. This paper is also an attempt to help to archive their stories and encourage others to do the same. Through online platforms and social media, experiences of women can circulate until they might later be a part of a larger recapitulation of events. When Syria's national narrative and Syria's narratives of gender are written anew, these stories could make history.

## 2. The narrative of a nation is always a gendered narrative

At the core of this paper is the concept of gender identity and its ability to be constantly fluid and changeable. The identity of a person is shaped by many factors that are historically, politically, or socially connoted within matrices of power, determining everybody's "coming into being" (Bourke 2009: 147). While other identity factors such as class, age, or education can allow for a whole spectrum to exist in between the dichotomy, gender is mostly experienced as a pure binary. When there is a change in norms defining what it means to be a woman or a man in a certain group or society, everyone's habitual practices, gender performances, and speech acts are influenced by that change and react to it, challenging and altering the gendered identities.<sup>2</sup> To quote Nira Yuval-Davis, "Nationalist projects are multiplex, multidimensional and historically specific" (2003: 9). There are different ways to define and narrate a nation. Quite similar to the construction of seemingly natural or god given gender categories, a nation cannot be built without a construction of 'Other'. This is particularly interesting when looking at border studies, for example, where people living just a few meters apart tend to believe in their unquestionable 'Otherness'. Several dimensions of the national narrative are deeply intertwined with narratives of gender. The biological reproduction of the nation could be examined as an example of one essential dimension. Maintaining and enlarging the population is crucial for national interest and women are held particularly responsible for the quality and the quantity of the "national stock" (Yuval-Davis 1997: 22). Therefore it is as important to control their

<sup>2</sup> Summaries of some pertinent works introducing the concept of gender identity being changeable and socially constructed can be found in the books of Wharton (2012) and Hall (2013).

sexuality, as it is important to control the terms of marriage and family laws. Another dimension of the national narrative is that of citizenship and difference: Being born is only one way to join a nation. For some categories of people, access in the form of migration is relatively easy – while it can be made impossible for others. A woman's request to migrate is often constructed as dependent on the wishes and prospects of the men in her family. Even when women are included in a nation's "general body of citizens", there are always rules, regulations and policies specific only to them (Yuval-Davis 1997: 24). There are many more dimensions to the national narrative, of which some will be discussed in the second step of argumentation.

In looking at the history of Syria, men have traditionally dominated formal spaces, like politics, academics or religion, and women have been more present in informal spaces, like the family, households and social community work. Hetero-normative family units have been narrated as the core and the reflection of the nation (cf. Roggenthin 2000; Pfaffenbach 1994). At the same time, the national dimension of citizenship plays an important part in the history of Syria and has inspired decades of women's movements as well as parts of the uprisings in 2011. There has never been a unified national family law in Syria.<sup>3</sup> The regulations concerning marriage and divorce, child custody and allowances, as well as heritage and dowry are not the same for everyone, but are divided along "sectarian (Sunni / Alawite / Druzi / Ismailis), religious (Muslim / Christian / Jew), and linguistic (Arab / Kurd / Armenian / Circassian)" lines (Manea 2011: 190). These groups are officially prohibited from inter-marrying, meaning that by law there is no equal, no impersonal Syrian citizenship (Manea 2011: 160, 200). This is important to understand when looking at the role of women during the last five years of conflict: The vision spread during the protest movements 2011 and before was not necessarily the vision of a democratic Syria, but one of an Arab Civil Soci-

<sup>3</sup> Many different explanations could be considered here: For once, the lack of unified family laws could be seen as a relic from the "completely ahistorical and artificial construct of colonial intrigue" that has been the founding of Syria as a nation state (Moiles 2012: 3). Moreover, gender equality in family affairs had never been a priority for the leaders of Syrian communities (Manea 2011). Finally, the Alawi regimes went by the "politics of survival" – trying to never gravely upset any of the important political elites, while instead attempting to "divide and rule" (Haddad/Wind 2014).

ety.<sup>4</sup> Without citizenship as such, any kind of unified national women's movement, for example, seems rather complicated. With the foundation of the Ba'ath Party's Women Union, the Assad regime had officially proclaimed gender equality, while illegalizing all non-party organizations after the Damascus Spring in 2001. Many women have kept fighting division by staying intellectually in touch, and practicing critical thinking and freedom of speech (cf. Lichter 2009: 17-19; Charles/Denman 2014: 154). Still, all those years of repression have diminished variety, leaving the movements as "fragmented and exploratory" as others opposing the status quo of the regime (Cockburn 2014: 346). Talking to the media network Al Jazeera one a month before the first Syrian uprisings, the lawyer Suhair Atassi explains her opinion on why there have not yet been any big protest rallies against the Syrian regime following the calls for revolution in Tunisia and Egypt:

*Syria has for many years been a 'kingdom of silence'. It has witnessed an uprising known as 'Damascus Spring' which was soon [...] quashed by a mouth-muzzling policy, with arrests and martial law, pre-decided trials dominated by security services, as well as discharges from work and travel bans. The state of emergency is still hanging as a sword above the necks of citizens. Fear is dominating people's lives, despite poverty, starvation and humiliation [...] The Syrian regime has established in the minds of people such terrible dualism: 'to keep the regime or descend into chaos' as if it is the guarantor of stability in the country. It is merely cosmetic stability strongly imposed by using repression and fear (Al Jazeera 2011).*

At the time of the interview, Atassi was running the Jamal Atassi Forum on Facebook, which has been previously banned, calling for political reforms and civil rights since the Damascus Spring. Also fighting for women's rights, she will become one leading figure for many women activists during the uprisings in 2011.

Three years later, the Syrian writer and journalist in exile Samar Yazbek presented an opposing evaluation of the events. What she thought "led to the outbreak of the revolution [was] namely the guilt in Syria's class society: the rich on one side, the poor on the other" (Kramatschek 2014). Concerning the regime's impu-

4 Looking into *Western* media coverage of the war in Syria and other uprisings in the Arab World, more often than not it is portrayed that the people are dying for democracy, even if none of them says so (cf. Maleh 2012). The idea of democracy as the final political goal can easily be detected as teleological imperialism, failing to acknowledge the actual political changes that are taking place (Beinin/Vairel 2011: 21).

tion of oppositional terrorism, Yazbek stated the following:

*The Islamists were expanding their reach and growing in number. But that has to do with the fact that there are no civil rights. In other words, it's a direct consequence of the dictatorial society in which people no longer feel safe and then turn to religion [...] IS, about whom everyone is talking right now, came from outside and occupied Syrian territory. It is very important to point that out, because the Syrians [...] tried to keep the revolution peaceful. Despite the murders, the daily killings by the regime, they didn't let the regime provoke them into committing massacres. The massacres are the doing of the radicals – and these radicals are a result of the policies of Bashar al-Assad. That's why I always say: you can't do anything against the jihadis from IS if you don't do something about Assad at the same time (Kramatschek 2014).*

In 2012, Yazbek said the following about the importance of religion for the uprisings in Syria: "It's a problem of conscience. It's not a problem of Sunni, Shiite or anything else [...] It's not a sectarian war. It's a revolution" (Edemariam 2012). She had to leave Syria after writing protocols of events happening during the first months of protests, using her high profile as an author, television moderator, and women's rights activist to try and make such inside information accessible to a bigger international audience. In June 2011, she was detained by security forces and left Syria afterwards, taking her daughter with her. When talking about her family, gender becomes a topic: "Everyone thought I wanted to be with a man, but it's not true – I wanted to be alone, I wanted to make my own future, I wanted to be a writer [...] They think my brothers are not men because they didn't kill me [...] A woman like me makes life difficult" (Edemariam 2012). Her outspokenness, and the fact that she had left her husband to take care of their daughter alone, posed challenges to a normative Syrian gender identity.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Whenever the nation is in conflict, gender identities are in conflict

National identity is always narrated as an identity shaped by war, conflict and revolution – or as Joshua Goldstein puts it: "War is deeply rooted in the human

5 More about Yazbek's experiences with Syrian security forces and her diary entries during the year 2011 can be found in her book: Yazbek, Samar 2012. *A Woman in the Crossfire. Diaries of a Syrian Revolution*. London: Haus Publishing.

experience, and [...] gendered war roles are permanent – a part of a society's readiness for the possibility of war. Males occupy the ongoing role of potential fighters, even in relatively peaceful societies" (2001: 57). Even though women are often excluded or under-represented in the public sphere and political decision making, they are always confronted with its outcomes – in sometimes life-threatening ways. The only thing women generally do not share with men when their country is at war "is the task of aggressive killing", even though exceptions can be found here as well (Goldstein 2001: 127). Narratives of conquest and exploitation are frequently gendered through "cultural molding of tough, brave men, who feminize their enemies to encode domination" (Goldstein 2001: 406). At the same time, violent attacks against women multiply during times of war. Lorraine Charles and Kate Denman point out that mass rapes are also used strategically to mark women's bodies "as envelopes to send messages" of fear to opponents (2014: 155). A nation's narrative usually uses gendered symbols to construct unity and uniqueness. Most noticeable is the notion of the 'motherland', which turns the mother figure into a talisman for the male soldier and hero to protect or fight for (Bourke 2009: 154). In nationalist gendered narratives, the woman either symbolizes the stable and secure nation, or the endangered nation about to be violated (Auga 2006: 41-42). Masculinity has to restore order and protect the endangered "women-and-children" at home (Kaufman/Williams 2010: 15). At the same time, risking one's life for the nation and fighting to defend it is very often constructed as closely linked to active citizenship. As another crucial dimension of the national narrative, militarization is gendered and when women are believed to be naturally peaceful, this belief can be turned into an argument against equal rights. Whereas once women are constructed as warriors, fighting shoulder to shoulder with men, they are behaving like active citizens and their rights of citizenship are therefore hard to decline (Yuval-Davis 1997: 93-100).

When the first mass protests in Damascus erupted, people were shouting *Ash-Sha'ab yurid isqat an-nizam!* (The people demand the downfall of the regime!), repeating this and other slogans from their fellow protestors in Tunisia and Egypt (Leenders 2012: 419). Much quieter protests had erupted before in Dar'a, a small border city in the rural south of Syria, thought to be inhabited merely by regime friendly Alawites and migrant laborers. Here a group of boys between ten and fifteen years old had been detained

and tortured for "scribbling" anti-regime graffiti on the walls of their school – some were tortured to death (Al-Azm 2014: 6). Women and men – the boy's relatives and friends – demanding the release of their children, marked the first protests of the Syrian uprising. The widespread sense of *'ajz* (an Arabic term denoting impotence, helplessness and incapacitation) fell prey to the feeling of being part of a revolution, and opposition movements in Syria were encouraged by the "early riser" Dar'a and its "revolutionary moment" (Kassab 2010; Leenders 2012: 431; Tilly 1978: 189-199). Several different sources agree to the fact that women have been part of these movements from day one, with gender usually being an important issue in the narratives of the uprising. Female political players have been encouraging peaceful solutions to the conflict, not only as an opposition to the regime, but to any kind of typically male connoted violence. At the same time, women have emerged as leaders within families as well as in society. Similar to Samar Yazbek, the actress Fadwa Soliman was widely known before 2011. Her Alawi background put her in a special position, and she later became one of the leading figures of the protests. When an interviewer asked her in 2012 about the problem of radical Islam in Syria, she answered the following: "The regime portrays Homs as a hub for extreme Islam, but I walk in Sunni neighborhoods distributing flyers, and go like this, without a veil, into the homes of religious families and discuss politics and organizing the next protest" (Oweis 2012). When saying "like this" she is referring to her hair, which she had cut short the year before when hiding from security forces. During this time, a video of her was uploaded on YouTube, in which she is talking about her hunger strike in Arabic, with English subtitles provided for an international audience:

*In case I or anyone of my family gets hurt in any possible way, I hold the regime, its security forces and 'Al Shabeha' [regime armed thugs] fully responsible for that. And I will keep protesting and continue my hunger strike [...] to break the siege on the suburbs of Homs and to show all our fellow citizens that the claims of the regime about armed groups, salafis and Islamic extremists, who want to overthrow the regime and exterminate the minorities, are nothing but lies [...] I ask of the great people of Syria to continue their peaceful struggle until the fall of the regime and the realization of a civic democratic state which is the dream of all Syrians, and I call upon you to unite and stand together to topple this regime that has lost its legitimacy ('AlQalamoun' 2011/2012: 0:42-1:43).*

She is reading the speech from a piece of paper, looking different from her former actress self as she now has a haggard face and her hair “short like a boy”, though she is still recognizable (Oweis 2012). Even though she does not refer to her new look in this video, it seems like that part of her gendered protest is meant to shock, but also to show how her identity has changed: her hair and face are symbols and expression of her struggle in which she feels united with “all Syrians” (‘AlQalamoun’ 2011/2012: 1:40).

Suhair Atassi is another activist not willing to give up her struggle. In the Al Jazeera interview also quoted in the first part of this paper’s argumentation, she talks about her experiences with Syrian police officers and street harassment. After participating in a sit-in she had organized “against the systematic looting and the continuing monopoly of Syria’s two mobile phone operators, MTN and Syriatel” she and her friends were beaten by “thugs” (Al Jazeera 2011):

*Two women were with the thugs. They began to insult us and use bad language, and soon they began to beat us. One of the female thugs took her belt and then ran after some young girls beating them [...] We were running while they were chasing us, beating and swearing at us while the police at the police station in Bab Touma Square were just watching (Al Jazeera 2011).*

It seems important to her that the thugs were women, just like her and the others. When they went to the nearby police station to report and get help, the following happened:

*A man in civilian clothes came in with another two. He refused to identify himself and locked the door of the room [...] Police are supposed to serve the people. We came to complain of an abuse we had encountered in the street, and the result was that we were beaten, insulted and threatened to death inside a police station (Al Jazeera 2011).*

A month before the uprisings started, Atassi had received threats telling her to stop her work, as the streets of Damascus, where she lived, were “filled with security forces” (Al Jazeera 2011). The police accused her “of having a website that was ‘infiltrated by Israel’, and described [her] as an ‘insect’ and a ‘germ’, working against the country’s interests” (Al Jazeera 2011). On the 16<sup>th</sup> of March, Atassi was arrested for giving exactly this interview to Al Jazeera. The interview was also broadcasted on television. After her release she became a leading figure for the secular democratic opposition, and was announced as vice president of the newly formed National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November 2012 (Carnegie

Middle East Center 2012). One year later, the human rights lawyer and civil society activist Razan Zaitouneh began talking about the circumstances of life under siege and about children suffering from starvation. She recorded a video of herself in December 2013 and sent it to the International Federation for Human Rights FIDH. In the video she speaks English, appears tired and pale, and reads her text from a piece of paper, similar to Soliman:

*The area has been liberated from the regime forces. But we experience daily bombings from the regime forces [...] At least three or four people killed daily in the city of Douma. But perhaps this type of death is preferable to the alternative: The other kind of death is slow and painful, because you experience it every second. You see it everywhere – it’s the siege. The lack of food, medicine and oil (FIDH 2013: 0:09-0:51).*

Then she stops and her expression changes, saying: “But there are many other stories to be told; about life, hope and insistence” (FIDH 2013: 1:44-1:52). For the remaining minutes she talks about these stories, including small projects that were founded on a regional level, for example in Ghouta:<sup>6</sup>

*We opened two centers [...] for women, where they have the opportunity to learn new skills, enabling them to earn living for their families and, most importantly, the center allows them an environment to meet and to strengthen each other with hope during this challenging time. In the past three month, over 300 women have joined the center and many others are waiting on the list (FIDH 2013: 1:53-2:28).*

Zaitouneh believes that the regime will fall and she promises that until that day “we will continue to report the regime crimes and demand the release of all political prisoners” (FIDH 2013: 3:40-3:47). She had been the head of the Violations Documentation Center in Douma until she and three of her colleagues were kidnapped by a group of armed men, just five days after she sent in the quoted video message and even before it was published by FIDH. She has not reappeared since (Pizzi 2014). Syrian women have been pushing the boundaries of what is socially acceptable when leaving their assigned spheres to start political protests on the streets and make “their own gender-specific demands”. This is done while also joining the “wider calls” for revolution (Al-Ali 2012: 28). Women archiving and

<sup>6</sup> To find out more about the Ghouta chemical gas attack, the article *If this isn’t a red line, what is?* gives an introduction, published by *The Economist* in 2013.

sharing the stories of battlefield and homefront and making them accessible for an international audience is not only a war on conservative Syrian gender norms, but also a struggle against the Nation's long implemented power structures.

#### 4. National conflicts produce lasting change in gender identities

An unstable society trying to defend or rebuild itself often seeks to find stability in the supposedly never changing gender roles. But repeatedly, history has shown that once gender roles are transformed through conflict and war, lasting change becomes apparent in the way people perceive these roles and their stability. So far, the political, historical, and military sciences – all still dominated by male scholars – have neglected the field of gender in times of war, or not studied it at all. “Men still do not have a gender” and as gender is seen as something static and unchanging, even war or conflict are usually not believed to have any lasting effects on it (Goldstein 2001: 35). Whereas if gender identity is understood to be a product of social norms, power relations, discourse, speech acts, or performance, it is just as changeable as these habitual actions and normative principles or relationships are. In times of conflict, identities are in conflict: “Wars, revolutions, natural disasters, and economic restructuring cause substantial changes to the prevailing perception of what is masculine and feminine, and what women are supposed to do and what men are apt to do in public and private spheres” (Rizq-Qazzaz 2006: 191). This indicates that while binary gendered narratives of the nation are especially essential in times of war or conflict, they are at the same time challenged and questioned by the uncontrollable circumstances. Through destruction something new can emerge – through anarchy-like moments in time, long-lasting power structures can be broken and rebuilt. In the horror of war – in the abashment of rights, laws, and safety – there also lies the possibility of significant change. Repeatedly, history has shown that once gender roles are transformed through conflict and war, this can cause lasting change to the way people perceive these roles or their stability, even in post-war society (cf. Goldstein 2001). The division between the peaceful women at the “home front” and the violent men at the “battlefront”, for example, can lose credibility in times of war or conflict (Bourke 2009: 147-149; Rizq-Qazzaz 2006: 191). The image of the home front as being secure and protected becomes

systematically shattered, and women become combatants – even if war time propaganda tends to ignore that. After the conflict is over, the cries for stability, security, and the old home – the pure motherland – usually sound louder than ever. Therefore, after the war it is the gender identity of women in particular that needs to be found unchanged, or rapidly changed back to earlier norms and images, after the war. Though depending on how long the exceptional phase lasted and how essential the challenges confronting the gendered identities have been, suppressing their outcomes in retrospective might not be possible.

This final part of the argumentation leads to further conclusions: Experiencing the Syrian nation in an ongoing state of conflict has turned women into political activists, fugitives living in exile, witnesses, partners, opponents, leaders, and lost ones. While some still believe in an empowering outcome of the revolution, others, like the politician Mouna Ghanem, fear that the ongoing escalation of violence is lastingly “destroying identity, dignity and the social fabric of families and communities, especially in a highly conservative society such as Syria” (Charles/Denman 2014: 156). Four days after her release from prison in March 2011, Suhair Atassi said the following in an interview broadcasted with English subtitles by the Thomson Reuters Foundation:

*The Syrian revolution erupted to reinstate the status of women. Women have been faced with twice the injustice during the Syrian revolution; they are victims and detainees, and the detainees are future victims and women have more struggles. There are women on the run for participating in the protests, others who are detained. Kidnapping has also begun in Syria and so has rape (Rowling/Boeglin 2012: 1:30-2:03).*

To Atassi, the protest movements have been gendered from the very beginning; women fighting for their rights have been a leading force during the uprisings. By the time she spoke, the battle in Syria had already been declared a civil war, with thousands killed and cities like Homs reduced to ashes and chaos. In December 2012, the U.S., Britain, France, Turkey, and Gulf states formally recognized the National Coalition as a “legitimate representative” of the Syrian people (BBC News 2015a). Now an exile living in Paris, the prominent activist is trying to collect humanitarian aid. One could say that she is selling the image of victimized women to an international audience to gain their support. At the same time though, her speech ends with the following sentences:



*Syrian women are now fighting for their rights shoulder-to-shoulder with the men [...] There remains no room for feeling paralyzed in these Arab revolutions. I believe that even if fundamental Islamic administrations come to power, women who were liberated will be able to fight for their rights and attain these rights. There will be no more submission in the Arab world (Rowling/Boeglin 2012: 2:22-2:31; 3:06-3:27).*

Just one day earlier, Samar Yazbek said the following in an interview cited before: “The real revolution will begin after the fall of Assad. Then we will have a feminist revolution to construct a new life, a new education, build a new society” (Edemariam 2012). To Mouna Ghanem, revolution is a process in which identities are changing and have to be changed in order to create a new state. In another interview, two years later with the digital media project Syria Deeply, Ghanem talks about her most recent project:

*Despite the death and destruction in Syria, we are trying to bring our people a message of hope. You can't live without hope [...] We are going to commemorate our second-year anniversary by bringing women together to sing about their country, love and peace. We will sing songs from all around Syria so that we represent a unified Syria. I can see the impact we have on the women: the women feel empowered, they find themselves through music and singing (Setrakian/Montgomery 2014).*

This might seem like a rather naive approach in a country that has been in a state of war for more than three years, with the U.S. and their partners bombing ISIS territory while the self-proclaimed Islamic State keeps on gradually expanding, creating pictures of violent massacres and broadcasting them on the internet as their own image campaign (cf. Said 2014; Plebani 2014). But Ghanem still believes in steady change and in empowering women: “Many are held back by traditionalist views on women's roles, which is what we are trying to break through by organizing events where women can distinguish themselves and be a part of a local community” (Setrakian/Montgomery 2014). This is how, in Ghanem's opinion, the new Syria will evolve: through strong women in strong local communities. This is because “women are the core of the people” (Setrakian/Montgomery 2014).

Protest movements and civil war have fundamentally changed Syria. No identity in the country has remained untouched or unchallenged. In a society where gender is a main category, all identities are gendered, and hence all the experiences during the last years of struggle are also gendered experiences. The more awa-

reness raised for these changes of what it means to be a Syrian woman, what it might have meant before 2011 and what it can mean now, the more it becomes clear that there is no such thing as the *Arab Woman* or the *Muslim Women* or the *Syrian Woman*. She is neither a victim, nor a hero – she simply does not exist. What exists are the images produced to serve certain purposes: creating an enemy, feeling better in comparison to the others, making people care, influencing political opinions, or finding an outlet for the hatred and fear produced by structural discrimination and a failed integration policy in countries like Germany. For these and countless other purposes, images of the *Others* have been produced and are constantly confirmed through discourse, creating distance, misunderstanding, and power hierarchies. Listening to people, i.e. to their personal stories of revolution, conflict and war, makes it impossible to keep up the same one-dimensional image of, for example, *the Syrian woman*. People change, gender norms change, and authoritarian regimes that have been in power for decades can be overthrown. This paper is an attempt to trace the re-negotiations of gender-dichotomies during times of conflict, but also to inspire a new discussion on if or how *the West* should take on responsibility in Syria: Asking those women, who are protecting and rebuilding the country right now, what kind of support they think they would need, would be a constructive first step. This is why this paper ends with one last quote from Bassma Kodmani:

*Honestly, the opposition is saying: 'This administration has not helped us, has not made us a partner, although we have made all the concessions: we have united, we have controlled the armed groups, they have complied and so on'. All of this is not producing guarantees from the American side. That it doesn't give the administration now the right to lower our ceiling and to tell us 'You must live with Assad, the agreement will look like this, these are the terms and if you don't like them, that is not your choice' (Atlantic Council 2016: 20:59-21:41).*

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