



Who Speaks for Syria?



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A report by:



The Munathara Initiative

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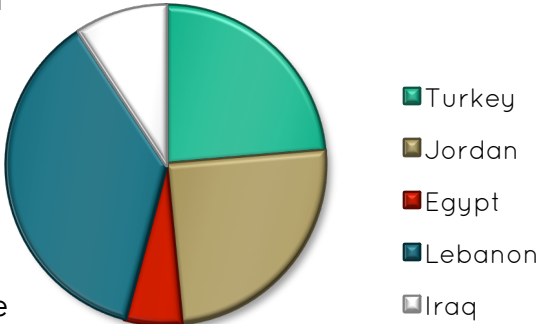
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Introduction

In early 2011, the residents of Deraa, a small city in southern Syria began protesting against the repression that Syrians had faced for decades. Inspired by the revolutions spreading throughout the region, by March 2011 protests spread in Syria when the regime reacted brutally against the city’s residents.

Over more than two years, Syrians have faced a brutal war. More than two million registered refugees have fled to neighboring countriesⁱ, with estimates that an additional 4.5 million have been internally displacedⁱⁱ. Of the more than two million refugees, 55.7% are under the age of 25ⁱⁱⁱ.

Distribution of Syrian Refugees



Throughout the conflict, Syrian youth have been one of the hardest hit by the conflict. They have been pulled out of their schools, recruited by military forces, displaced from their homes and families, and often have to take on jobs to help support their families in under-funded refugee camps.

While Syrian youth shoulder much of the burden of the conflict now, they also must take on the future of their country. More so than any other generation, young Syrians today will face an uncertain future, driven by a conflict that seems to have no end. They must rebuild the country that is being destroyed by the war, and yet are so often overlooked by politicians on all sides.

Since the summer of 2013, the Munathara Initiative has sought out the voices of the Syrian youth, providing them opportunities to speak out about the direction they think their country should take. This report, and the accompanying video, seeks to show the perspective of the youth in asking, and answering, some of the most pressing questions facing the country.

Who Speaks for Syria?

For the last 43 years, Syria has been ruled by the Al-Assad family, beginning with Hafez Al-Assad who came to power in 1970, and followed by Bashar Al-Assad, his unlikely heir who came to power upon his father's death in 2000. In the early days of Bashar Al-Assad's rule, there was optimism that he would bring a new era of democracy to Syria. As one activist said, "Bashar's inaugural speech provided a space for hope following the totalitarian years of President [Hafez] Asad. It was as if a nightmare was removed."^{iv}

Building on this optimism, a group of 99 prominent thinkers created a statement to Al-Assad, promoting democratic ideals and asking for the new President to make reforms to the existing political infrastructure^v. However, with a new crackdown in August 2001, ten activists were arrested, proving that the new Al-Assad regime would not live up to the hopes of the activists.^{vi}



Ten years later, the Middle East was facing an unprecedented wave of protests. Sparked by the self-immolation and subsequent protests in Tunisia in December 2010, the "Arab Spring" swept through the region. As a new year dawned, protests began popping up all over the region, from Tunisia and Egypt to Yemen and Bahrain. The entire region, and in fact the entire world, watched

gripped by the pro-democracy forces emerging throughout the region.

In the spring of 2011, in a small city in the south of Syria, protests began. The town of Deraa is commonly seen now as being the cradle of the Syrian revolution. As protests grew and the brutality of the crackdown escalated, activists throughout Syria began to join in. By the summer of 2011, protests had spread throughout the country and the revolution escalated.

By late 2011, the revolution had turned into an armed conflict. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was established in July of 2011, followed in August by a political body, the Syrian National Council (SNC). However, following a failed ceasefire attempt in the spring of 2012, the conflict continued to escalate. Foreign fighters from Iran and Hizbollah, believed to number in the thousands, are now supporting the Al-Assad regime and have been gaining ground on the fractured rebel groups.

By late 2013, it is unclear who speaks for the opposition. With the regime being firmly supported by foreign fighters, the opposition has found it increasingly difficult to maintain ground. Politically, the Syrian National Council (SNC) has not been successful in creating a unified message to build support for their cause, both inside and outside of Syria^{vii}.

As this political vacuum has continued, numerous groups and think tanks have released their own visions for the future of Syria, creating an even more fractured discourse about the direction the country should take.^{viii}

However, as these political decisions and calculations have taken shape, very little is being done to actually include the voices of those affected by the conflict. During the summer of 2013, the Munathara Initiative launched a program, in partnership with the Geopolitical Trends Center in Istanbul, to engage Syrian refugee youth in Turkey and Jordan. Following Munathara's proven approach, outreach workshops and activities were held in Istanbul, Turkey, and Zaatari, Zarqa, and Amman, Jordan.

Throughout this process, 62 youth were trained, and 28 submitted 99-second



A poster announcing Munathara's ninth debate #DD9: Is Foreign Military Intervention the only Option Left for Syria?

videos detailing their "Bold Proposal for Syria." During this process, Munathara also faced an unprecedented issue – many of the youth feared reprisals for speaking out, so much so that they either refused to record videos or demanded anonymity. For the first time in Munathara's history, fear greatly limited youth engagement, and drove many to only participate with guarantees of anonymity.

Despite these obstacles, Munathara was able to reach hundreds of youth through the online voting process, and ten participants were crowd-sourced to attend a training workshop in Istanbul in September 2013. These ten participants underwent a two-day workshop on debate techniques, how to present oneself publicly, and how to present proofs for one's perspective. From these ten participants, two were voted as the winners to participate in a live debate on 18 September 2013, held in Istanbul.

Consistently, the youth engaged by the Munathara Initiative have demanded an immediate cease-fire and national dialogue. As Hana explained: "In order to solve the Syrian crisis, I suggest ceasing fire by both parties, ending bloodshed of Syrians, getting the Syrian youths back to Syria, assisting the Syrian opposition, and giving the government a deadline of 90 days maximum to step down while ensuring a safe departure."

Syrian youth are "an influential segment of society...and its future-makers"

Over and over again, the Syrian youth reiterated the importance of their inclusion in building the future of Syria. The youth are, according one participant, "an influential segment of society... and its future-makers."

What is Next for Syria?

As Munathara engaged with more youth, a theme began to emerge. Many youth spoke of the need for a cease-fire accompanied by dialogue. Additionally, as Munathara participant Tahani argued, youth should be included throughout the process:

"In order to solve the Syrian crisis, my main suggestion is ceasing fire and establishing a buffer zone where Syrian refugees can go back to Syria and their daily lives, especially youths, the most influential segment of society. They should pursue their education to rebuild Syria after all parties engage in dialogue, including the opposition and the regime, with the involvement of the youths, being an influential segment of society and its future-makers, to reach a solution that satisfies all parties, including Al Assad's stepping down from the throne and getting back all displaced people, especially politicians, to Syria."



Tahani explaining her view

As the crisis continues to escalate, the youth continue to pay the price. Pulled out of their schools, the youngest children are quickly falling behind. As one refugee stated: "I told my daughter to read, but she didn't know how. All of those children used to know how to read. But now they don't."^{ix} Iman Shaker, a panelist during the live debate held in Istanbul in September made the same point, when she said that "9 year-old Syrian children haven't even started school... they haven't been to school for three years." In addition to lacking education, more than 7,000 children have lost their lives and millions are displaced.^x Their injuries are not all physical as well, as children struggle to come to terms with the loss of their families and friends, and witnessing acts of horrendous violence.

More than 2 million Syrians are refugees, 55.7% of whom are under the age of 25.

These youth, more than 1 million refugees and more than 2 million internally displaced, more than half of the population of approximately 20 million Syrians, are the future of Syria. Without education and traumatized by war, how will they grow into the leaders of Syria in ten to twenty years?

There have been several proposals put forward to serve as frameworks or starting points for political resolutions of the conflict. In one report, the word "youth" is only mentioned on seven pages (out of more than 200); its most impactful mention being: "For example, there is the possibility—or at least, the hope—that many segments of Syrian society, particularly its youth, will respond positively to the political reform process, in order to stop sectarianism and tribalism from developing in the Syrian consciousness."^{xi}

Participants of this debate include a Druze, a Kurd, a Cyriac and a Sunni Arab. We all care about Syria. Syria lived through 10,000 years of coexistence. It's hard to disintegrate this bond.

The debate panelists in Istanbul agreed that the youth have an inclusive outlook. As Rana Yousef stated: "...what is the future of Syria going to be like? This is a tough question. We're working for the future of Syria. Syria will be a civil, secular country, God-willing." This is reiterated by Mustafa Al-Sayed when he stated, "Participants of this debate include a Druze, a Kurd, a Cyriac and a Sunni Arab. We all care about Syria. Syria lived through 10,000 years of coexistence. It's hard to disintegrate this bond."



Rana giving her perspective

However, Rana Yousef did warn about not recognizing the divisions that do exist and referred to Islamist factions that have come into Syria: “I’m against claiming that sectarianism doesn’t exist among us; it does exist, especially at this time. Sectarianism is prevalent; we’re disintegrated, divided, a country that supports and embraces terrorism. All this is going on in Syria.”

Meanwhile, the Syrian National Council (SNC) has agreed to participate in another round of talks in Geneva, aimed at a political solution.^{xii} On the ground in Syria, the opposition is also gearing up for what it believes will be the most decisive battle in the war – the fight for Qalamoun. This town near the border of Lebanon is one of the last rebel-held strongholds that provide free movement between Syria and Lebanon for the opposition, and it is widely believed that if the opposition were to lose this stronghold, it would lead to their defeat in the war.^{xiii}

The next round of talks, called Geneva II, are anticipated to take place in January 2014. The SNC will take the lead in these negotiations, and has stipulated that it will only move forward if the Al-Assad regime has “no part in the future of Syria.”^{xiv} While there is tension amongst the SNC ranks, this progress is encouraging. The Geneva II talks resemble the kind of dialogue advocated by the Syrian youth, forcing those in power to sit down and negotiate a settlement to the war. However, a problem remains: of the 425 members of the SNC, the average age is 50 years old, and is 82% male.^{xv} Syria’s population has boomed since the 1960’s leading to a population where some estimates say that 60% of the population is under 20 years of age.^{xvi}

Facing these kinds of demographics – why is the average age of the SNC 50 years old?

In debating the issue of foreign military intervention, Yara Khalil in the debate stated:

“Intervention in Syria exists already, whether Russian, Iranian, or Hizbollah intervention, intervention in Syria exists already. So if the intervention will be in the interest of Syria, if it’s going to help Syrian youths who are absent from the political scene weigh in and talk about what they want to build Syria...[I would support it].”

Intervention in Syria exists already, whether Russian, Iranian, or Hizbollah...

Would foreign intervention, militarily and politically, lead to the further integration of youth in the future of Syria? Yara advocates that as part of any foreign intervention, that dialogue, to include the youth, accompany any action that a foreign party would take.

On the other side, Rana Yousef, also speaking on behalf of the youth, made a very different argument:

“Allow me to speak on behalf of Syrian youths who are erudite and aware. Since the revolution began, we’ve been one of the parties of the conflict. We definitely support the Syrian revolution, but we’re against military intervention for several reasons. First, we’ve seen US foreign policy and we’ve seen the intervention in Afghanistan, for instance. Since 9/11 to this day, until the day the USA withdrew all its military troops, air forces, and marine forces and everyone else from Afghanistan, How is Afghanistan doing now? What state is Afghanistan’s society in? What brought Afghanistan to this? Iraq is also the closest example. We don’t want a repeat of the Iraqi scenario in Syria. We don’t want what happened to Iraq to happen to us.

... A dialog includes all parties in dispute in Syria; all parties need to compromise a little. All parties in dispute should sit at a table together to have a dialogue, including civil society and youths, and activate the role of the youth to achieve a Syria that truly is a free state, a rule-of-law state. We must include youths and civil society; they will be very effective in reaching a solution at the dialogue table. There can be no solution except via dialogue.”

“...we’ve seen US foreign policy and we’ve seen the intervention in Afghanistan...how is Afghanistan doing now?”

While Yara Khalil and Rana Yousef disagree on the issue of foreign military intervention, they do agree that youth are central to creating a free and democratic Syria. As such a large proportion of the population, and being both the igniters of the revolution and the bulk of its fighting force, the youth must be included in political discussions. The future of Syria is in their hands.

What is the Role of the International Community?

There is no clear consensus on the desirability of foreign military intervention in Syria. The youth that Munathara worked with split evenly, half supporting military intervention, half against. One participant, who joined Munathara's workshop in Istanbul directly from Syria (via Gaziantep), likened foreign military intervention to the actions of an evil doctor – without the help of the evil doctor every patient would die, but with his actions, as bad as they may be, a few may live.

In this scenario, should the United States and its allies play the role of the evil doctor?

As Yara Khalil said in her closing argument of the debate:



Yara explaining her views

“Opinions are different, but the goal is the same. We want a free Syrian state and to end the bloodshed. For me, supporting the strike is to end the bloodshed of Syrians, to save lives. Let’s not look at that from a political or military viewpoint, but from a humanitarian perspective. We could save as many lives as possible, of the people dying everyday, and those displaced.”

Others, including a defected Syrian army official, now working with the Free Syrian Army, advocate stronger military assistance from the international community. He outlined three ways that international assistance would benefit the opposition, including overseeing Syria's borders to ensure that more foreign fighters do not enter the country, providing more and better weapons (including anti-aircraft missiles) to the Free Syrian Army, and pressuring Syria's neighbors to assist with the efforts of the opposition (such as allowing Syrians to pass back into Syria.^{xvii} The Army official goes on to say, “What we're seeing today is a war of destruction. We're witnessing the complete destruction of Syria's military strength, economic, and human capabilities. Why has the world sat back and allowed this to happen? There are hardly any young men left. They've all been killed or imprisoned. If this is allowed to go on, only children, women, and elderly people will be left.”^{xviii}

“For me, supporting the strike is to end the bloodshed of Syrians, to save lives.”

Like Yara, this official supports some form of intervention to end the conflict. As time goes on and the death toll continues to rise, the situation becomes more desperate on the ground. In September 2013, French President Hollande told the United Nations

“...the solution must be completely Syrian. No one needs to interfere in Syrian affairs to fix them.”

that by their calculations, more than 120,000 had been killed since the onset of the war.^{xix} Interestingly, inaction, leading to such high levels of deaths, seems to convince those opposing intervention that the international community has no interest in the well-being of Syrians, and thus they should stay away. As Rana explained, “...the solution must be completely Syrian. No one needs to interfere in Syrian affairs to fix them.”

Rana Yousef then goes on to explain further the impact such a strike would have, and highlights the problem of intervening before a negotiated political process is in place:

“Let me ask you a few questions: what’s our role as an opposition force after and during the military strike? Are we really sufficiently prepared for the military strike? We the opposition, internally and abroad, what are our responsibilities on the ground? And, can we fill the political voice, which will happen after the strike? Are we sure that this strike will bring the regime to an end?”

The questions that Rana raises are important, and have not yet been answered by the SNC, other opposition groups, or the international community. The Geneva conferences, especially the latest round just announced for January 2014, may be the biggest hope the opposition has for answering these questions, and finding a diplomatic solution to the conflict. At the same time, fractures within the SNC, and more broadly the opposition, create tensions within the body and may contribute to another collapse of the Geneva talks.^{xx}

Conclusion

Given the fractured opposition, diametrically opposed perspectives, and ever-worsening humanitarian crisis, the Syrian war is not something that will be resolved

easily and looks likely to continue well into 2014. It has been the subject of two years of debate now, and no one has been able to come up with a workable solution.

Through Munathara's work with Syrian refugee youth, there are several recommendations that seemed to resurface frequently. They have been mentioned throughout this report, but deserve repeating.

First, it is essential to include youth in any negotiated settlement of the conflict. Not only are the youth disproportionately affected by the conflict, they are also the largest demographic within Syrian society and are the implementers of any long-term strategy that would be negotiated now. As such, it is not only smart to include youth in these negotiations, it is imperative.

Second, dialogue is the most effective way to end the conflict and create a Syrian democracy. As part of the settlement of the conflict, dialogue is the only way that different ethnic, religious, cultural, and social groups will be able to come together and form a new political system. Without talking to each other, any new democratic system would be inherently flawed and biased against the groups that are excluded. Youth, women, and civil society groups must be included in any dialogue.



Third, and finally, any process for resolving the Syria crisis must be owned and driven by Syrians. The United States and the international community can play a critical role in helping to provide resources and assistance to Syrian groups, but ultimately, Syrians themselves must hold the reins. This also requires that opposition groups, such as the Syrian National Council, step up and take the lead in organizing, discussing, and deciding on a way forward. With a renewed opportunity coming up in Geneva, the opposition could put forward a plan for resolving the conflict that the international community can support. At the same time, the international community, and the United States in particular, must be willing to listen to the requests put forth by the Syrian opposition, and be willing to support their decisions.

Programs such as the one implemented by the Munathara Initiative in the summer and fall of 2013 provide an opportunity and a venue for these ideas to be discussed, vetted, and voted on in a free and open space. Open to the public, Munathara's online platform allows all voices to be heard and considered, and through open debate, competition, and ultimately the live debate event, the voices get amplified to thousands of others.

During this project period, Munathara trained and heard the perspectives of 62 youth, who uploaded 28 videos. Many youth that Munathara worked with were fearful of reprisals from the regime if they were to create videos posted online that were critical of the regime. Most of these participants had family still in Syria, and many decided not to post videos. Of the 28 who did record videos, 17 did so anonymously.

28 individual videos
viewed a total of 5,258
times

11,505 views on YouTube
of the full live debate

428,888 reached on
Facebook

As of November 20, 2013, the full live debate event has been seen more than 6,000 times on YouTube. On Facebook, the video post reached more than 420,000 people, garnered 2,610 likes, and was commented on 165 times. And all of these numbers continue to grow.

These debates offer an opportunity found nowhere else in the region where youth are put on the same level as opinion leaders who are already driving discourse in the region. This serves to not only provide a fresh perspective not seen on Arab TV stations, but it also tells the youth that their opinions matter. Additionally, Munathara debates never descend into hysterics, or even violence, that tend to plague many similar kinds of debates in the region. Civil discourse is key to the future of Syria, and the Arab world, and the Munathara Initiative seeks to provide a platform to drive that process forward.

Endnotes

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