Razan Zaitouneh for President

written by Mohja Kahf | January 31, 2025

Razan Zaitouneh

Razan Zaitouneh for president. That is, I know the human rights lawyer has not been found since she and three staffers of the Violations Documentation Center[1] were forcibly disappeared[2] on December 9, 2013. Back in 2011–2012, from the diaspora, I worked with Razan a few times over Skype, doing what I could to love on the nonviolent grassroots uprising and to amplify their efforts at documenting atrocities—including those committed by armed rebels.

I understand the grim odds of Zaitouneh being alive today. Still, "Razan Zaitouneh for president" speaks my fantasy of a future Syria where Razan could run for president: an undivided Syria with intact sovereignty and equality for all genders. A stalwart ally of Palestinian liberation with an autonomous Kurdish region and Kurdish rights everywhere equal to Arab rights. A pluralist democracy with an independent judiciary and economic self-sufficiency—free from neoliberal exploitation.

As a poet, it is my task to imagine. Today, at the dawn of a post-assad[3] Syria, Razan would be in her forties. I imagine her running for president in her sixties. The twenty intervening years beginning now will have been perilous ones for Syria.

In the first euphoria of emerging from assad's grip, Syrians laden with habits formed under dictatorship yield to a tendency to idolize military leaders. People say things like, "Give the new government a chance; it's only been a month…a year now," and, "So they want women to dress a little more modestly. Would it kill you?" Even Syrian men not invested in religious ideology passively accept the extra layer of male privilege the new "pragmatic Islamist" order offers them, or readily accept deprioritizing gender. Despite Syrian feminist protests, even some of the women who during the 2011 revolution led protests efforts and organized local governance, even women who became household breadwinners and raised children singlehandedly in icy tents in Idlib, are harangued to postpone gender struggles with the familiar refrain: "Now is not the time. Syrians need food and water."

Buoyed by such acquiescence, new de facto leaders embolden ideas in the populace about women being "biologically unsuited"[4] to be cabinet ministers, downplay incidents of sectarian mob violence and deny human rights violations by their own ranks, issue decrees they have no legitimate mandate to issue from government offices they have no mandate to hold, and practice little accountability to the citizenry—much like the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces did in Egypt post-Tahrir. Initially, Syrians tolerate this because they need basic services: gas for cooking, potable water, food they can afford to buy with the weak lira. To deliver these, the de facto rulers appease Turkish backers by continuing hostilities against Kurdish forces in the north and east. They seek from the United States and the European Union relief from sanctions by doing little to address Israeli incursions on Syria's

sovereignty, Israel's bombing of multiple Syrian cities, and its ongoing genocide in Gaza.

After restoring basic services, the new authorities distract Syrians from questioning their appeasement of foreign powers. They erect monuments to martyrs who fell during the fight against assad, holding celebrations whose profundity no Syrian who lived through assad's horrors can deny. They use the fear of Syria becoming fragmented into statelets to rally popular support, and pursue financial and legal reparations from bashar, another nationally unifying cause. Pretending to negotiate a new constitution, they monkey-wrench the process indefinitely, blaming those who demand healthy debate over the text.

All the while, without directly imposing legal restrictions on women, the new authorities encourage restrictive views of gender in the complex spectrum of Syrian society. Orientalist condescension from foreign organizations does not help Syrian gender activists fend off the specious attack that their concerns stem from Western influence. Simultaneously, majoritarian Syrians bask in promoting a conservative, sectarian "Make Syria Sunni Again" cultural agenda.

However, great numbers of grassroots Syrians, used to dissenting out loud since 2011, mobilize. They apply skills learned in the all-too-quickly marginalized nonviolent protest movement—creating new counter-cultures, publishing anti-sectarian newspapers, organizing local democratic self-governance, drafting petitions and press releases, and a thousand other resistances disguised as mundane life[5]—to demand accountability, equal gender rights, and recognition of Syria's history of oppressing indigenous Kurds. Syrians of all genders, who played key but often unrecognized roles in the original protests, keep cultivating a rising characteristic among the populace: civic efficacy, the belief that "I can change my country."

This is the belief for which blogger Tal al-Mallohi[6] was imprisoned at age seventeen in 2009. It is the belief that unarmed Syrian citizens perceived as marginal possess meaningful roles in deciding the path of the nation. For this, Rima Dali,[7] Kinda al-Zaour,[8] Ahed Elhendi, Lina Wafai,[9] Rami Nakhle, Suheir Attassi,[10] Khawla Dunia, Suhayb al-Ammar, and thousands of nonviolent Syrian activists were hunted, imprisoned, exiled, or killed. (For this kind of multi-axis dissent, back in our all-too-real timeline, the armed rebels turned on Razan Zaitouneh and disappeared her.)

A new protest movement arises, led by Suwayda province, Deraa, coastal Syria, and the Ghouta. After two to five years of grassroots pressure and nationwide petitions, fair elections are finally held. Predictably, these elections bring mostly Islamists and neoliberal capitalists to power, with a few token others. Yet these Islamists must negotiate with a far more pluralistic Syrian demographic than Egypt's.

As new cohorts of Syrians embrace civic efficacy, more women come to know their self-worth. They trust themselves. They lose patience[11] with the perpetual postponement of gender equality "for the greater good." More Syrians understand the national civic need to sustain internal dissent and accountability; from the margins comes valuable insight.

Meanwhile, the Islamists finally getting their ballyhooed day in power face the mundane realities of governance: collecting garbage, providing health services, and maintaining the power grid, with the financial crutch of Qatari monies not always there to rescue them. These tasks, and Islamists' domestic and foreign policy missteps, reveal their fallibility, and the aura of their ideological sanctity fades. A decolonized indigenous ethos exploring humankind's evolution past violence in intimate alliance with the earth, trees, and the ocean begins to emerge in Syrian youth culture.

In this period, farmers in Quneitra and Deir Ezzor pioneer a "grow what you eat" program, steering Syria toward national economic self-sufficiency and away from dependence on Turkish aid and Gulf

investors. Arab Syrians, disgusted at being coerced into killing fellow Syrians in the northeast for a Turkish agenda, build greater solidarity with Kurds. A new generation of Arab Syrians learns the once-forbidden truth: that the Baath regime committed atrocities from 1963 onward, uprooting Kurds from their homes in the so-called "Arab Belt," just as Palestinians were uprooted by Zionists. That March 12, 2004, was not an anti-Arab soccer squabble, but a Kurdish intifada for basic human rights.

A third nationwide protest movement emerges, women-led, with key centers in Salamiyeh, Suwayda, Jableh, Hasakeh, Daraya, Qamishlo, and Kafrenbl. The visible protests are just the tip of an iceberg of slow but persistent societal change, driven by seamstresses with a "weave what you wear" campaign, schoolteachers, farmers' unions, and other fully independent labor unions.

Finally, only three nationwide protest movements and two decades of struggle later, Razan Zaitouneh runs for president. Her crossover respect among Syrians of diverse ethnicities, genders, and religious communities secures her win. Voter participation reaches an all-time high, fueled by vigorous debates over her candidacy. Detractors attempt to smear her—perhaps with private swimsuit photos, as misogynist bullies did to women of leadership in the Syrian Revolution—but fail to overshadow her political know-how.

During Zaitouneh's administration, Syrian struggles for gender justice persist. Having a woman in power does not dismantle gender inequity and often provokes backlash. Simultaneously, Syrian dissenters, welcomed as a strength in post-assad Syrian society, challenge ongoing neoliberal exploitation by fat cats still trying to remake Syria as another Dubai or late capitalism's candy-land.

President Zaitouneh prioritizes Palestinian liberation in international negotiations, understanding that only through justice for Palestinians can Syria hope to regain the Golan.[12] Syrians continue processing the traumas of the assad era for decades, just as Palestinians will continue reckoning with Nakba trauma for generations after their Right of Return is recognized and they repatriate, and a new era begins for Palestinians together with no-longer-Zionist former Israelis in New Palestine. Imagining possibilities is a necessary step in rebuilding Syria.

notes

1. Violations Documentation Center in Syria.

2. Lewis Sanders IV, Birgitta Schülke, Wafaa Albadry, Julia Bayer, "Razan Zaitouneh: The missing face of Syria's revolution," *DW*, Mar. 15, 2021.

3. I have long practiced de-capitalizing assad's name in orthographic protest.

4. Juan Cole, "Syria's New Fundamentalist Government: Women 'biologically' Unsuited to Politics, Universities to be Segregated," *Informed Comment*, Dec. 20, 2024.

5. For concepts of nuanced resistance in mundane life and the creation of subcultures by those who are marginalized even *within* revolutionary spaces, see Razan Ghazzawi, "The 'Un-Revolutionary' Figure," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, Nov. 8, 2022.

6. Amnesty International, "Syria: Tal al-Mallohi sentenced after flawed trial," Feb. 18, 2011, MDE 24/006/2011.

7. "Rima Dali: FP's 100 Top Global Thinkers," *Syria Untold*, Mar. 16, 2015.

8. Lauren Feeney, "Syria: Brides of Peace," *New York Times,* June 7, 2015.

9. Lina Wafai, Syrian Women's Political Movement.

10. "Syrian human rights activist, Suhair Atassi, talks about women's rights."

11. Agence France Presse (AFP), "'Hundreds in Damascus Protest for Democracy, Women's Rights," Dec. 19, 2024.

12. For deeper analysis of the interconnected nature of Palestinian and Syrian liberation struggles, see Banah Ghadbian, "The Golan Heights, Syria and Palestine's Intertwined Liberations," *Spectre*, Aug. 6, 2024.