



KODMANI: “FRUSTRATION AND DESPAIR BREED RADICALISM”

An Interview with Bassma Kodmani, the Executive
Director of Arab Reform Initiative



Bassma Kodmani is a co-founder of the Arab Reform Initiative where she has been the Executive Director since 2005. She is also Associate Professor of International Relations at Paris University, currently on leave from her post. She has served as senior adviser on international cooperation at the French National Research Council (2007-09), Associate Senior Research Fellow at CERI-Sciences Po (2006-07), adviser to the director of the Académie Diplomatique Internationale (2007-2009) and Senior Visiting Fellow at the Collège de France (2005-06). Prior to that, she held various positions at prestigious academic and policy institutions. In 2011-2012, she took a temporary leave from the Arab Reform Initiative to take on a mission as Head of Foreign Relations and spokesperson with the Syrian National Council, the opposition coalition seeking democratic change in Syria. She resigned from that role in 2012. She is also the co-founder and treasurer of the Initiative for a New Syria, an NGO based in Paris specialized in relief work and support for civil society in Syria. Bassma holds a PhD in Political Science from Sciences-Po in Paris. She has authored books, reports and articles on conflicts in the Middle East, regional security, political developments in Arab societies, security institutions, religious authority and political authority in the Muslim world and the question of Palestine.



ORSAM: How would you evaluate the current situation in Syria?

Bassma Kodmani: The situation has been in steady deterioration over the last three years and a half. The humanitarian disaster continues with no decisive action of any sort on the part of the UN or the countries that have the capacity to end the ordeal of the population. The Assad regime has made the humanitarian condition a part of his military strategy and the most outrageous aspect of this is that all countries seem to behave as if there is nothing that can be done about it. The regime's strategy has been to bomb any attempt by the population to organize the lives of civilians at the local level

and create some form of order in areas that it does not control. The loss of any prospect for a solution - be it military or political - has left hundreds of thousands of young Syrian activists and their families in disarray. When there is despair, the minds and hearts of those who suffer become extremely vulnerable. Radicalism grows and extremist messages become attractive.

The only reason for hope is that the countries that can influence the situation are beginning to understand the magnitude of the danger for the region and for themselves. What they will do is a different discussion but at least the realization in and of itself is a beginning.

What could you say about life under conflict conditions?

The Syrian population is about to face a fourth winter of a disastrous situation. In the areas controlled by the opposition forces, the Syrian people live in the middle of rubbles due to air raids and barrel bombs thrown at them by the regime's air force. It is deprived of all the vital means to survive, lack of food and medicine, lack of fuel for electricity and heating, no regular schooling for children. The besieged areas are the most hardy hit. Death has become part of daily life. Last winter, death as a result of starvation and malnutrition was in the hundreds. People cope in incredibly creative ways; resilience is remarkable. Everywhere they started cultivating whatever piece of land they had, they organize schooling in basements and manage to teach the full curriculum as well as organize exams for the students. But they remain powerless in face of the lack of medication, scarcity of basic commodities and permanent risk of being killed.

The international community's support for the Syrian people has been far from perfect. What has been the Syrian opposition's experience with the international actors in terms of getting political, military, and humanitarian assistance?

There is a feeling of deep loneliness among the Syrians. They feel that they have been sacrificed

for the sake of geopolitical interests of regional and international powers. The fact is that the international community seems both insensitive to the suffering and blind in face of the dangers that the situation on the ground can breed. After three and a half years, inaction on the part of the countries that have the capacity to act has proved more dangerous than any country is willing to admit.

The distortion to the narrative adds insult to injury. While they are bombed, besieged and starved, the Syrians are constantly asked to provide assurances about the fate of the minorities as if the majority did not matter. Month after month, they desperately waited for a vote at the UN Security Council that would condemn the atrocities committed by the regime, would force it to allow aid into the suffering areas or would coerce it into making some concessions. Instead they found all routes to be closed in their face: no prospect of a political solution at any time in the three past years, no proper armaments to fight a military battle or even enough to protect the civilian population in face of the regime's heavy weaponry. Obama's red line was crossed in August 2013 with the use of chemical weapons by the regime in the countryside of Damascus, then the international community backed off from any punitive measure and lauded Assad instead for handing over his chemical arsenal. Lastly Syrian

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groups attempted to pursue the legal route and provided the solid evidence of crimes against humanity when a photographer from inside the regime brought out 55 000 photos proving that at least 11000 prisoners had been tortured or starved to death in the sole prisons of Damascus area. International judges told the Syrians that there is no way the file could be taken to the International Criminal Court.

There have been criticisms about the divisions within the Syrian opposition, including the Coalition. Such divisions are sometimes used as excuses to withhold international assistance. What do you think about such criticisms? What can be done to overcome the divisions?

The divisions within the Syrian opposition are one of the favorite subjects of the interna-

tional media. The opposition has many problems and weaknesses. When talking about humanitarian aid or support to the civilian population generally, it is true that the lack of organization within the opposition has been a problem. However, if we are talking about military support, the blame cannot be on the opposition. The countries which could have helped it develop a strategy never did it, the right types of armaments most often did not come at the moment when they were needed. Instead money and arms were thrown at the wrong groups by private sources and some governments in irresponsible ways. It is always most convenient to put the blame on the weakest party but in the Syrian context, the tragedy is that the wrong groups received support in a chaotic manner while the reasonable groups, those who carry



the genuine nationalist democratic Syrian agenda, were deprived of support.

As a result, the moderates became inaudible because they simply had no means to fight and no other option to work on in the diplomatic or political sphere. One can notice almost systematically that every time there was a veto by Russia and China at the Security Council to avoid condemning the regime or allowing some decisive action, we find a new military group declaring itself on the ground with a more radical mantra every time.

Is the Syrian opposition in need of reorganization? In what ways could it be streamlined?

First, the opposition needs to get rid of some bad habits and establish a code of conduct. There is a major problem of discipline within its ranks when it comes to its relations with the media for example. Members have a regrettable inclination to go out and publicly criticize their colleagues or complain when they disagree. They don't realize the damage that this causes. I always wonder when I hear or read one of them who they think they are complaining to and whether they mean to purposefully cause damage to the overall body. This said, such a very diverse group is inevitably fragile and has to manage important tensions and challenges. It cannot be asked to be broadly representa-

tive, to work as a cohesive body and to fulfill practical roles at the same time. This is why the formation of a provisional government was a good move though it could have come much earlier. The same can be said of a military council. The Coalition can now play the role of an assembly or parliament while the government takes on the executive roles. But there remain important shortcomings such as the absence of a clear definition of roles and how they are distributed between the two and the fact that neither body respects the prerogatives of the other which is to be added to the factionalism. These weaknesses have prevented the opposition from building its own coherence and resisting better against outside influences. As a result it has not built popularity among Syrians nor credibility abroad.

The connection between the opposition organized abroad and the opposition on the ground is a subject of criticism. How would you assess your coordination with the local groups in different parts of Syria?

As I just said, factionalism and lack of efficiency result in certain groups within the Coalition building special relations with certain groups on the ground rather than the Coalition developing a structured relationship with the inside, be it the military groups or the local councils. Regional powers

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carry a good part of the blame as well because they often meddle in the affairs and seek to control part of the Coalition but here again, as a Syrian, I believe it is our responsibility to limit such influences if we showed more solidarity within our ranks. Because we cannot have control over other countries' behaviors, nor can we blame them for seeking to advance their agendas, but we could certainly organize ourselves better and resist these influences more effectively.

How do you explain the spread of ISIS in Syria? What's its current strength?

ISIS builds on despair and thrives when there is a vacuum. Despair came from the loss of hope that I described earlier in face of the vetoes at the Security Council, the absence of humanitarian aid and the lack of adequate armaments to fight the regime effectively. Faced with the absence of any prospect, helpless civil-

ians and frustrated fighters had no choice but to submit to the authority of a group that comes in with financial means, the ability to provide food and a capacity to fight.

The rise of ISIS has been framed as a threat to the regional and international security. There is now greater interest in fighting ISIS after the recent developments, with some calling a combined approach –Syria and Iraq together-. What do you think about such arguments? Should Syria be discussed separately instead? Why?

The Syrian opposition along with some of the regional countries, Turkey in particular, had been warning against the risks of leaving the situation in Syria drift without proper management. The Free Syrian Army was able to fight and push back ISIS effectively in a large area of the north in early 2014 but in the meantime, ISIS was thriving in Iraq building on

the anger of Iraqi Sunnis and conquering territory and resources inside Iraq. We reached a point now when the FSA cannot do it alone. But it can certainly play a very effective role if equipped adequately. In fact, ISIS cannot be struck without the FSA fighting it on the ground in Syria but fighting ISIS through punitive strikes will not bring success and may even backfire. Three and a half years into the fight against the regime while the Syrian population and the FSA are still receiving barrel bombs daily, how can you convince them that their enemy is not the regime but ISIS? They are ready to confront ISIS as they did earlier but they need to be told what the plan is concerning the future of the regime. If they feel that the world has now decided to let Assad off the hook while some voices are calling for rehabilitating him with the outrageous pretext that he is a “lesser evil”, the Syrians will feel that they have been the victims of a huge manipulation.

What happened in Iraq is most interesting, namely that Iran agreed that the head of the system (in their case the Prime Minister Maliki) needed to be removed for the political solution to become possible and for the US to agree to strike ISIS. There is every reason to believe that the same arrangement can and should be made in the case of Syria.

Do you have any studies about the end of the conflict? When and how it might happen? What preparations do you have for the “Day after”?

The Coalition is working hard on plans for the immediate future in order to organize the forces against the regime more effectively while groups outside are defining plans for political transition and what kind of negotiations need to take place in order to produce an end to the conflict and a real transition in Syria while guaranteeing the unity of the country. We are conscious of the risks that if we as Syrians do not produce our operational plan for a solution, the solution will be imposed on us by outside parties and it will most likely not suit our needs. Contrary to what some may think, it is most urgent to produce the plan and the process. Then we need to talk to every player who has influence on the regime and on groups on the ground in order to remain in control of our future.

What would you say about Turkey’s involvement in support of the Syrian opposition?

Turkey has been a true ally of the opposition from day one. Its role has been invaluable on all levels and it continues to be, and I am a witness to the fact that Turkey sought to strengthen the moderate and liberal line within the opposition. I believe Turkey has also been a victim of the lack of responsible

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management of the Syrian crisis by all parties, the great powers, the UN, NATO. In this context it had to deal with too many issues on its own and now it finds itself being blamed for having allowed this or favored that. At this stage, we need Turkey firmly on board to support the moderate opposition,

both the political Coalition and the nationalist groups on the ground who are fighting to liberate Syria. We will need Turkey to address the political future, including of course its active cooperation in defining the right political formula for the Kurds of Syria as part of the restored Syrian integrity.

ORSAM is an independent think-tank specializing on Middle Eastern affairs. ORSAM seeks to diversify sources of knowledge on the region and establish a channel of communication between the local experts and Turkish academic and policy circles. Toward that end, ORSAM facilitates the exchanges of officials, academics, strategists, journalists, businesspeople and members of civil society from the region with their Turkish counterparts. ORSAM conducts studies on the regional developments and disseminates their results to the policy and academic circles as well as the wider public through various publication outlets. ORSAM publications include books, reports, bulletins, newsletters, policy briefs, conference minutes and two journals *Ortadoğu Analiz* and *Ortadoğu Etütleri*.

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Ortadoğu Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi (ORSAM)

Süleyman Nazif Sokak No: 12-B Çankaya / Ankara

Tel: 0 (312) 430 26 09 Fax: 0 (312) 430 39 48

www.orsam.org.tr