Is it possible to separate women’s rights from human rights in general and is it possible to obtain these rights under a dictatorship regime?

These questions had been raised among activists many years before the outbreak of the Syrian revolution due to the increasing calls to amend the personal status law. They were raised during private and confidential forums. Those who raised them did not have a voice: they were deprived from accessing any platform in light of the prevailing political muteness and emergency law that had been applicable for more than four decades in Syria, and confiscated of all rights and freedom.

Most of the Syrian women activists and political opponents did not get involved in this battle at that time due to their belief that women’s rights cannot be separated or disentangled, and due to their belief that it would be meaningless to have delusive gains under a rule that violates all the rights and does not acknowledge citizenship.

When the Syrian revolution began in 2011, Syrian women realized that it was the right moment to demand all rights: freedom, justice and full equality under a civic and democratic state; a state of citizenship and a state that is ruled by the law.

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that Syrian women had the main role in the outbreak of the revolution, particularly in Damascus. While waiting for the verdict hearing of the activist Ali Al-Abdallah, more than 50 male and

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female activists, lawyers, and politicians gathered in the hall of the military court. Al-Abdallah had been arrested for writing an article criticizing the politics of Iran and he was sentenced to one year in prison. While waiting, there had been arrangements for a sit-in in front of the ministry of the interior to protest against the conditions of the political prisoners, who announced an open-ended hunger strike inside Adra prison. While male politicians suggested that the sit-in should be restricted to only prisoners’ families and wanted to submit a petition including their demands to the minister of the interior; the women insisted on mobilizing and expanding the participation and insisted on raising the ceiling of the demands. The women’s views won in the end; there was a mobilization, most of the sitters-in were women, many of them were arrested on that day, and some of them were not released until after a long hunger strike.

These Syrian women leaders, including Razan Zaitouna, believed in democracy and human values and challenged the Syrian regime for many years, as well as the Islamists that kidnapped Zaitouna to silence her voice and the values she believed in.

A few months after the revolution and with the excessive violence of the regime, women felt the danger of approaching violence. They also realized that this would limit women’s participation disproportionately given the magnitude of women’s presence and their active role. They launched initiatives through which they proved their political stance, which was to support the revolution and peaceful protest and to refuse all forms of violence against protesters, including killing, arresting, and torturing. They also demanded that the revolution be kept peaceful, for this was seen as the unwavering way to bring about the change they aspired to and wanted about the dangerous ramifications of armed actions.

During that time, women worked very hard to mobilize and organize themselves in groups with clear objectives, and they started to further expand their activities and networks in order to include women from other regions, particularly in conservative communities. With the intensification of the regime’s repression, women began to work in relief and to provide medications and medical supplies. With the intensification of violence and the arming of the revolution, women
were excluded from the fieldwork and many female activists had to flee Syria since they were directly and regularly targeted.

Syrian women did not abandon their responsibilities and their active role even after they left Syria. They started to establish women’s organizations, feminist networks, and lobbies to mobilize their efforts and to work on women’s issues, needs, and empowerment in all fields and to have their voice heard to obtain decision-making positions and activate their role in the political transition process and envision the future of a democratic Syria.

Syrian Women’s Network (SWN) is a non-profit and independent network that was established in May 2013 by a number of organizations and independent individuals. SWN works on active women’s participation and civic, political, cultural, and economic empowerment. It also works on raising community awareness to give voice and presence to Syrian women in all international forums. SWN is one of several bodies that have been established. Another example is the Syrian Feminist Lobby that was established in July 2014 to press for an active role and equal participation of women throughout political decision-making processes inside the opposition spectrums that believe in democracy. Additionally, groups of specialized organizations have been established in all fields such as law, constitution, and its engendering.

Since those organizations and networks believed in the peace process and building a new Syria, the Syrian Women’s Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD) was established under the auspices of United Nations (UN) Women. SWIPD distinguishes itself by its inclusiveness for diverse women who have different ideological and political views, yet who could come to a consensus on a group of common principles that bring them together and regulate their work and activities. The Initiative had a lobbying campaign that targeted the UN special envoy to Syria and Ambassadors of pertinent countries to include representatives from the Syrian feminist movement during the negotiations process. SWIPD also participated in the round of negotiations that was held by the Special Envoy (May 2015) during the preparations for launching Geneva III.
Chapter 7

Syrian feminist movements, in general, have so far achieved the following:

- the Syrian Women’s Advisory Board that works directly with the Special Envoy, Mr De Mistura (despite the many observations on his performance);
- a women’s Consultative Group of the High Negotiations Committee;
- three women out of fifteen members in the High Negotiations Committee (the Opposition);
- 30% representation of women in the deliberations of the Civil Society Support Room in the negotiations in Geneva;
- a large number of Syrian women who are politically empowered and prepared to be in decision-making positions.

On a personal note:

I am not satisfied with what we have reached so far and believe that some uncalculated moves have had negative impacts on long years of feminist struggle.

Today, the situation on the ground is appalling, the Russian military intervention and the targeting of schools, hospitals, and civilians in general undermine the efforts for peace, the negotiation process, and political transition. However, we are condemned to hope, we have to continue our efforts to achieve just peace and return to building a new Syria, and I believe that Syrian women have learned a lot from the hard conditions we have experienced and this suffering will impose a new reality on Syrian women, and new relations if we take what it has to offer.

On the civil society level:

In my opinion, if certain conditions are met, the role of women will be totally different after the war and reality will impose the emergence of new women
leaders and new relations in a society that is more open and balanced. Women will not accept exclusion or discrimination, especially since the main responsibility for reconstruction will be theirs due to a lack of men, like what happened in Germany after the Second World War. But as I mentioned this cannot be achieved without providing certain conditions.

A fair political solution is needed, based on the Geneva I communiqué, and that would lead to a democratic state and end all forms of tyranny; accompanied by a dignified return of refugees, who should not be forced to return. The transitional justice process should be initiated, because there is no peace without justice. Also, real support should be provided by the West and the friends of Syria, with a comprehensive plan like the Marshall plan, which observes the following:

- reconstruction of the economy to provide job opportunities in all areas of Syria to encourage those involved in fighting to leave their weapons and join the process of rebuilding;
- constructing a new educational system that includes human rights values and a culture of peace;
- strengthening the role of civil society;
- and providing projects aimed at women’s economic empowerment.

And the most important and urgent condition for now is that the violence should be stopped and humanitarian aid must be completely separated from the trading of political negotiations and allowed to reach those in need. Water, food, and medicine should not be weapons of war. The siege should be broken. That can help a lot in reducing the suffering and emigration.