

The Modern Day Syrian Crisis: Youth Mobilization and Development of Identity

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- نضال عالمي طويل لصون حقوق المرأة
- دور بارز في صحف الإعلام السوري الجديد
- سوريات يفرن بجوائز دولية



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I. Abstract:

In this paper, we will be observing the Syrian crisis through both the Feminist and Constructivist Lenses. The Feminist Theory analyzes history as a struggle between genders, with the patriarchy dominating most of mainstream history and thus blocking opportunities for women to affect modern discourse. The Constructivist Theory argues that it is discourse, as well as social norms and ideas, that shape states and their relationships with other states. This paper will specifically follow a timeline from 2011-2019 as we analyze the rhetoric and discourse from the civilians and how they have shaped the course of conflict.

II. Introduction

The structure of international political systems can be viewed through theories that help us reason with impactful policies and examine global situations. These theories, particularly constructivism, help explain and impose order on factors in specific political affairs. The constructivist lens examines political weather through the norms and practices of individuals and focuses on an identity formed by the people in a state. Constructivists believe state behaviors and interests are guided by socially constructed identities rooted in culture, communication of ideas & discourse; this identity shows how society perceives or interprets political situations and government policies. The theory assumes political change successfully reflects the ideas of the people, it also assumes the way groups think and speak about themselves in comparison to others will dictate state behaviors and interests.

Seeing as the constructivist relies heavily upon citizens and their relationship to the state, this lens can be applied to a weakened society such as people in the Syrian crisis. The Syrian conflict has made a large impact on the lives of the Syrian people and neighboring countries alike. The fragility of Syria's civil war troubled states through authoritarian governance, the involvement of chemical weapons, and an unstable society. Applying the constructivist lens to the Syrian crisis deals with citizens who experience a lack of security, education & freedom, live in poverty, carrying diseases and many even acclimated to death. A good example of a constructivist approach in this society is the feminist movement. Feminism relies on the societal perspective of women's roles and rights within the community. The Feminist theory works simultaneously with constructivism to explore a historical struggle between genders, allowing

women to affect modern political discourse and influence policies. Amid the variety of civil conflicts brought by civil war, a feminist revolution sparked within Syria.

III. Literature Review

This paper will be analyzing the Syrian conflict through three pillars: youth mobilization, the evolution of Syrian identity, and the rise of social justice movements. Both constructivism and feminism rely on introspective dialogues on identity and social norms, but much of the earlier studies on this topic focus heavily on the role of children and women in Syrian identity. It is impertinent to understand how intergenerational trauma has affected Syrian identity, as this paper will urge the international community to recognize how young adults are mobilizing their societies.



One of the diagrams a children drew in response to the questions of the “Future Butterflies” research.

The mainstream constructivist community studies refugee camps and how the children have aided in the post trauma healing and development. Although many refugees carry scars from the trauma of fleeing the war, humanitarianism places the hope in

the Syrian children to lead the way and one day rebuild their home. A published study on ICT Wayfaring researched how Syrian refugee children of Za’atari refugee camp were using technology to help others, mainly their parents. This research asked the children to identify someone that they wanted to help (ie: father, mother, sibling, friend) and the device they would create to help them, and found that children had a mostly optimistic outlook on their future. In conclusion, “The people of Za’atari, face information poverty, misinformation and

disinformation, and other issues...we contributed a greater understanding of the experiences of Syrian refugee youth, finding that the young people at Za'atari are, in many ways, just like young people everywhere with strong aptitude for ICT wayfaring and in need of support to develop their ideas, and education paths,” (Fisher, Karen E., et al, 2016).

As Fisher and her fellow authors noted, the Syrian refugees face overwhelming information poverty. The state of modern Aleppo has changed dramatically due to the conflict, it begs the question of how much their communities have weakened and how people, specifically women, can play a role in healing their society. A study was published by the International Journal of Public Health, concerning a series of structured interviews that were performed on eighteen married women living in informal or economically impoverished neighborhoods in Aleppo before the conflict in 2011. The study aimed to explore low income women's understandings of the influence in their own neighborhood on their sense of health and well-being, as well as to offer insights into developing the identities that shape subsequent policies for post-conflict Syria.

The study published by the International Journal of Public Health emphasized the importance of healthy social networks in Syrian neighborhoods. The Aleppo Household Survey highlighted some of the underlying societal problems for women in pre-war Aleppo. Most women, specially those living in informal neighborhoods, reported low educational attainment (almost all below ninth grade in school), some even reported illiteracy. Most feminists in Syria work heavily to bring about further education for women. This survey also indicated that 89% of married women were housewives, therefore not in formal employment. As a result, women were assumed to have particular insights into the possible impacts of neighborhood characteristics in

health issues, activism, and Syrian identity. The significance of this pre-war study allows the public to reference the views of women who lived in Aleppo before widespread destruction, and shows how essential their voices are in order to establish post-conflict policies.

IV. The Case

Before the conflict, Aleppo was Syria's largest industrial and financial center, thus making it a critical region to gain control of. Citizens in Aleppo were divided, with the rebel forces gaining control of the eastern regions while the government took the west. Aleppo served as the key battleground location in the civil war between forces loyal to President Assad and Dissidents. The impact of an eight year long conflict on the Syrian population has been overwhelming, due to violent deaths, injuries and psychological trauma, but also the widespread destruction of homes, economic hardship, and targeting of healthcare facilities. Civilians faced deprivation of basic necessities such as food, fuel, medicine, and endured countless war crimes, including mass executions and gender based violence. Most of all, the damage caused to the social fabric of what was an ethnically and religiously mixed society; the same social fabric that houses feminist advancements and influences the Syrian state identity examined through the constructivist lens.

In 2018, ViceNews uploaded a documentary where their correspondent, Isobel Yeung, explores Aleppo with a footage team. As she meets local citizens, she asks how they have come to adjust to the constant bombings in arguably the most dangerous city of the Syrian war. Casually, a small group of men explain that, *"Everyone is in danger. No human here is free from it,"* and that, *"At any time a missile might fall, so how can we escape it?"* (Vice News, 2018). Yeung goes on to interview doctors in the Al-Razi hospital, in which patients struggle to receive critical attention and orphans wander the halls in search of their families. At some point, there is a blackout and the lights flicker for 15 seconds before returning. Dr. Mohammad Atkeeh,

however, keeps a smile and says “*Never, ever [will I be afraid, sic]. I will not. Because we believe in God.*”



Lina Shamy, Syrian activist on Twitter

Thus, we see a resilient people who have desensitized themselves to the outbreak of violence. Amongst the youth, however, we can observe resistance, hope, and progressive attitudes towards the future. Again we can thank the mobilization of the youth through social media platforms. Twitter user and Syrian activist @LinaShamy uploaded a short video on December 12h, 2016 to bring attention to the

aggressive bombings by the Assad regime in Aleppo. In this video, she gives a comprehensive outline of Assad’s overtake of Aleppo, in which many civilians were killed violently and thus prompts her condemnation of the attack as a “genocide”. At the end, she pleads for help and asks for viewers to “*Save Aleppo, and Save Humanity,*” (@LinaShamy, 2016). This video was viewed over 791.1k times, retweeted by 25.8k users, and hearted by 13.4k users, with many users expressing outrage in the comments section. This user, who goes by Lina Shamy, has a follower base of 48.3k users and she shares other articles about the Syrian war and how refugees are affected. Her Twitter biography reads, “To the great Syrian Revolution I belong. my life is for it, my voice & my death.”

Discourse surrounding the Syrian feminist movement dates back to the late 1800s during the time of Arabic *Nahda* (awakening). It was a period of cultural awakening that spread from Egypt to Syria and other Arabic-speaking countries. The history and development of feminism in Syria started in the late 19th century and early 20th century. The Syrian feminist movement and struggle was accomplished and led by many admiral women. The first women's organization was called The Light of Damascus. It was founded in 1915 by Naziq-al Abid. She was known as the Arab Joan of Arc. She was later made an honorary general of the Syrian army. In 1928 a feminist named Nazira Zain al-Din reinterpreted the Quran from a feminist point of view. She also published a book condemning the Hijab or the practice of veiling, and stated that Islam should require women to be treated equally with men. In 2011 the Syrian civil war began and is currently ongoing, causing a major decline in Syrian social life. The Assad regime allowed vigorous revolting Syrians to take up arms, facilitating the entrance of Jihadist groups such as ISIS in to the Syrian population, this threatened the role of Syrian women and feminist movements. When Hafez el Assad took power, he tried to demolish and end women's seclusion. He motivated and encouraged women to get education. He also encouraged women to join the workforce with men. Syria promoted itself internationally to be a pro-women secular regime. But in reality, women were exposed to an exceptional cultural decline, experiencing the regime's ruthless massacres of Syrian Women. Currently, the history of the Syrian feminist movement has evolved to focus on recognizing women who exhibit a vital role as revolutionary activists at the forefront of an ongoing Syrian revolution. It examines the advancements and hurdles these women face and how they impact Syria's current identity and policies through activism in their individual communities. The Aleppo Household Survey reinforces this notion finding that

women in Aleppo often resorted to paying higher rent prices to be a part of an integrated community. These women, especially those who did not cover up feared they might be stalked or harassed, and stressed the importance of mothers' and daughters' right to a liberal dress code. Women interviewed referred to the protective nature of christian males and the importance of social networks in neighborhoods where they are free to exercise their liberal values close to friends and family. This shows the ongoing strength and resilience of Syrian women and children alike to achieve the same peace within their communities.

V. Applying the Theories (Feminist/Constructivist lens)

While humanitarian efforts have played a great role in the development of Syrian identity, it is ultimately a cultural development that must be entrusted to the refugees themselves. Angelina Jolie, a famous actress who has played a critical role in refugee advocacy and the development of feminism in Syria, recently released a statement in an article on the United Nations website in which she addresses a possible peace negotiation. Rather than accepting the truce, Jolie argues that, *“It is impossible to describe the resilience and dignity of the Syrian families I have met. Every Syrian refugee I have spent time with over the last eight years, young and old, has spoken of longing for peace in Syria so that they can safely return home...It is critical that returns are driven by refugees themselves, based on informed decisions, and not by politics. Talking to refugees and placing their perspectives and concerns at the centre of future return planning is vital – it is a question of rights,”* (United Nations, 2019). Using her platform as a famous actress, Jolie has won international attention for the ongoing human rights violations within Syria and other Middle Eastern countries. Her efforts to rewire the narrative back into the hands of the refugees exemplifies the constructivist theory of grassroots advocacy.

While many Syrian refugees continue to seek shelter in refugee camps outside of Syria, their way of life has continued to flourish even within their limited spaces, within their communities of faith. Many people who visit the refugee camps are in fact inspired by the unwavering faith to be found within these refugee camps, of which oftentimes lack adequate resources but still intentionally designate spaces for faith services. And yet this conservative faith component seems to elude the younger generations, as an emerging Syrian LGBTQ+ population become more visible. In an article published in 2019, 27 year old Fuad al-Essa recounts his

coming out story and the pain of being cut off from his family after the reveal. After settling down in Turkey in 2017, al-Essa says, *“It broke my heart that I was scared to death to talk to my parents about my identity. It broke my heart that my parents were the ones I was most afraid of.”* al-Essa continues, *“I told my father that I will always love him and the family, but this is my life and I will not hide myself anymore. That was the last time I talked to him.”* Another LGBTQ+ Syrian activist, Amira al-Tabbaa, reveals that LGBTQ+ Syrians are often at the most risk in their own homes, as their conservative families often keep them at home and cut off their communication to the outside world.

Unfortunately due to the lack of ground resources, human rights organizations have struggled to document the figures on LGBTQ+ Syrian refugees, much less shed light on their issues. Omar and Talmanzan write that *“The mentality [LGBTQ+ Syrians] are up against is uncompromising. One conservative Syrian imam confidently told NBC News that there are no homosexual Muslims and that the act was punishable by death,”* (Omar and Talmanzan, 2019). And even so this grand narrative of Syrian identity continues to grow despite the odds being stacked against them, and the younger generations of Syrians continue to gain footing in the world. The silencing of LGBTQ+ members hinders the application of constructivism in Syria.

Constructivists argue that events in international politics can be examined through focusing on the study of the identities of actors, and the norms and practices of individuals that stem from those identities. The relationship between the different identities of actors (whether local, or international) is important for understanding influencers in international policy through this lens. Constructivist theory also argues that it is not only a states’ behaviors that are shaped by the beliefs of itself and others but their very interests. Change can occur through the

socialization of ideas, identities and interests are not fixed, they can change as experience, discourse and practices change. Syrian identity portrayed an authoritarian political system in which people, particularly women and LGBTQ+ people alike, had little voice. Throughout the years the feminist movement has shown how the social mechanism of the constructivist theory can impact the behaviors and interests of the Syrian State.

Historically, the Feminist theory has critically examined social inequalities between genders by approaching issues of equity based on gender, expression, identity, and sexuality. Political activists focus on the performative constructions of gender and examine the core social foundations within the state. Feminist activists achieve political change and reinforce these social constructions through discourse and campaigning in areas such as reproductive & voting rights, domestic violence, sexual harassment social justice. As well as workplace issues regarding equal pay, medical leave, and employment discrimination. Constructivism allows Syrian feminist activists to influence communities and public policy by constructing identities involving gender equality. These efforts also show the relationship between opposing identities and the interactions between groups who do not agree with the feminist movement. The application of feminism in Syria follows a duality of strengthening social constructions of gender equality while also interacting with brutal and repressive extremist factions that try to send women and activists centuries back.

The beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011 paved the way for women to play a prominent role in peaceful revolution. Despite all the tragedy and tribulations that have occurred in Syria women are resilient in fighting for equality. Women have fought ISIS and are involved in the military. They are standing guard at checkpoints and are police officers. Women are also getting

involved in the political council, and influencers in slowly changing the Law. Polygamy and child marriages are now banned. They are building social structures for women only and are educating young children to believe in equality for a better future. Syrian women were most present and influential in the coverage of alternative media. Women in Aleppo occupied significant management positions in newly-established newspapers and radio stations after the outbreak. Some women were even awarded prizes in journalism and other fields due to their large involvement in media and peaceful activism. Women embraced the opportunity for free expression and enriched the revolution. Syrian newspapers covered women's rights in a considerable number of articles and reports. However, this also posed a threat to women in some capacity, enduring extremist and repressive factions who threatened the feminist movement from being published. The change is slow and has costs hundreds of lives but the feminist movement is ongoing.

VI. Suggestions/Recommendations

The Syrian crisis has had many different influential actors when viewed through the constructivist lens. Gender-based violence and discrimination has impacted women in Aleppo in numerous ways. The Aleppo Household survey suggests that women in Aleppo rely on the experiences of their neighborhoods' characteristics to their sense of well-being. The study also reaffirms the importance of including the voices of women in marginalised communities, informal and low income neighborhoods in post-conflict policy. Syrian women are aware that maintaining and sustaining social networks was within their sphere of influence and shows how impactful the feminist movement can be. Syrian women have experienced increased feelings of insecurity, to increasing poverty, forced displacement and a deterioration in living conditions. They also face the economic burdens of family, and increased marginalisation where 'political oppression, extremism, widespread violence, and exploitation' compromised the possibility of women's social participation. Donating to relief efforts such as 'Doctors Without Borders' or volunteering your time to assist non profit and refugee organizations are a few ways to show solidarity towards the situation in Syria.

For individuals with less availability, it is equally valuable to spread awareness of the violence against LGBTQ+ Syrians. This can be done by educating yourself and sharing articles and videos on your personal social media platforms. Similarly, stay updated on the war within Syria, as government infringements on natural rights continue to spur international relief efforts. As we live in an increasingly globalized world, the spread of information is a valuable mechanism against government violations, and history has taught us the power of civilians demanding their governments for accountability.

VII. Conclusion

This paper observes how previous studies of the Constructivist and Feminist theories have largely excluded personal narratives and their contributions to an evolving worldview. All the complexities of the Syrian crisis can be further researched by observing the role of technology, education, and social media as well. Social media platforms have become an important resource for information to be spread amongst the people of the world, which prompts a greater understanding of the international system.

In conclusion, the forefront of a bottom up analysis should rely on primary sources and the continuous discourse that arises from the impacted communities, as both theories argue that domestic issues reflect government agendas. With a growing presence within social media platforms, Syrian activists like Lina Shamy and Amira al-Tabbaa continue to push the boundaries of political correctness and norms within our international delegations. Thus, the ongoing narratives and discourse surrounding the Syrian conflict rests in the hands of the youth.

VIII. Authors' Note - 2-3 Sentences About Who Contributed What

This paper was written by Albert Diaz, Adrian Lee, and Miriam Yong. Albert Diaz and Adrian Lee researched into the historical and cultural development of Syrian identity. Albert Diaz and Miriam Yong wrote about the feminist applications to developing Syrian identities.

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