

SYRIAN WOMEN'S TWO-PRONGED BATTLE

Covering the Syrian uprising for the last two years for CNN, Arwa Damon has personally interacted with Syrian female opposition activists from all social strata, religious backgrounds and beliefs. Damon delves into the role that Syrian women are playing in the revolution. She transmits the stunning remarks of the young female activists who brave heavy surveillances, physical violence, and gunfire since the beginning of the uprisings. Facing all kinds of oppression from both the government and sometimes the opposition forces, Syrian women have an even more difficult struggle ahead.

Arwa Damon*



* Arwa Damon is a Senior International Correspondent for CNN, currently based in Beirut.

The conversations with Catherine al-Talli over *Skype* were cryptic, no voice, only text, and deleted once the conversation ended. An anti-regime activist, there was no way I could have used her name in my report without putting her in danger.

In the summer of 2011, I was in Damascus with a *CNN* team on the first official visas the Syrian government had granted our network since the uprising began around four months earlier. We knew we were being watched, the intelligence agents in their drab suits trying to hide their faces behind newspapers outside our hotel were impossible to miss. Opposition activists warned us that all phones were tapped, and suspected our hotel rooms were as well.



Catherine is no stranger to the ways of the Assad regime. Her father, a longtime activist, was detained in 1992 for eight years. Simply coming out to meet us was a formidable risk for her to take, considering the regime surveillance. We had previously arranged hand signals and a meeting point on a crowded street. I was with a female colleague, *CNN* producer Jomana Karadsheh. We pretended we were shopping, with a small flipcam buried deep in a handbag.

We tailed Catherine through the narrow alleyways of Old Damascus, nervously looking over our shoulders before finally following her into a dark apartment building, where one of her friends lived, where we could talk.

Catherine, a human rights activist and lawyer, took part in some of the first demonstrations against the regime in Damascus in March 2011. A couple of months later she was detained and imprisoned for 48 hours.

“I saw how they treat prisoners there, they don’t treat them like human beings in front of them.” She told us. “I saw how they forced a prisoner to drink toilet water, and I saw how they called a woman activist dirty words.”

She believes she was released because of her prominence as a lawyer, but it forced her to effectively live in hiding. Like other Syrian women I met during the course of my reporting, she was taking charge and playing a significant role in the revolution.

Catherine's focus at the time was to document the Syrian government's violations, to build a future case to prosecute regime officials and compile evidence of government brutality. She attended dozens of demonstrations cataloguing the shootings, beatings, and detentions. She recalls one demonstration where the protestors were chanting for the unity of the Syrian people, the unity of Muslims and Christians.

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“Suddenly, the security forces’ guards jumped in front of the protestors, less than 10 meters away, and the security forces start shooting the protestors.” She remembered. “We were in the frontlines and at least five next to me were shot and killed at that time, I saw that with my own eyes.”

“You asked me about why I am going out when it’s really risky. Because it’s our country, in simple words, and it’s our responsibility to make it better.” She added.

A few days later we snuck out once again to attend a secret meeting of opposition activists held at a school in an upscale Damascus neighborhood. The activists asked us not to use their real names. And like many of the activists that I have met, they have now disappeared, perhaps detained, or perhaps like so many of the more moderate voices of the revolution, driven underground.

One of the women, going by the pseudonym Maria, a Christian, said she used to demonstrate until she nearly died after security forces fired tear gas, followed by bullets at a protest she attended. Another young woman who works as a lawyer, and asked to be called Sana’a, a Muslim, was briefly detained and began working behind the scenes to get other activists out of jail.

For many people who are watching events in Syria unfold mostly through *YouTube* videos, it would seem that women are not a factor. Delve behind that and you will discover that this is not the case. While not as visible as their male counterparts, women are playing a crucial role in events in Syria, one that is arguably going to grow even more critical.

In Damacus again, some six months after I first met Catherine, in the neighborhood of Kafarsouseh, I met three women, clad in black from head to toe. They said that fear of sexual assault by security forces kept them off the streets.

“We want our voices to be heard, women also want freedom, this is our Syria as well.” They all echoed one another.

Yes, they were of conservative Sunni backgrounds, but no they insisted did not want to live under Islamic law.

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All university students had dropped out. They would spend hours stitching together the opposition flags, making face masks for the men to wear, and ran small secret underground clinics to treat the wounded, having gone through a crash course in first aid.

“It was a shock at first,” Insisar, 19 years old and the youngest of the three said of seeing gaping wounds. “But we have a goal that we need to reach, so we have to deal with it.”

They also tracked down the families of the dead or detained, usually a male member of the household to provide them with whatever financial aid they could, food and blankets.

Since then a year has passed, the phenomenon of the “radicalization of the revolution” has ingrained itself. Extremist groups like the Nusra Front, which the U.S. recently designated a terrorist organization, are at the forefront of the rebel fighting force and seeing their capabilities, influence and ranks grow by the day.

In Aleppo in December, a Salafist commander joked that the only thing between him and the Nusra Front was a cigarette. The Front does not allow its fighters to smoke, and he did not want to give up nicotine. It would seem that line is a widespread joke that I heard more than once during my two-week trip there.

We ended up walking with him into a former sweetshop, which recently turned into a field clinic. He overheard a conversation I was having with one of the medics, a 19 year-old high school senior who asked us to name her Aya.

“You did what?” he asked her, his voice dripping with contempt.

Aya, glared straight at him, her dark eyes lined with bright blue eye shadow, her young face framed by a pale pink headscarf.

“I left my husband and came to volunteer here.” She responded, her voice quiet, but defiant.

He gave her a look of utter disgust before he turned on his heel and stormed out of the room.

Relief spelt across Aya and her colleagues' faces, but quickly gave way to anger. She was not about to let the Syria she was fighting for be ruled by the likes of him.

Aya's English is nearly impeccable. She dreamt of being a lawyer. At the same time Aya was a new bride. Her husband had recently joined the Free Syrian Army and she left home—with his and her family's blessing—and trained as a medic.

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“With everything happening in this country, I decided that I am supposed to do something and I just can't take a gun and fight because I am a girl.” Aya explains. “So I decided to come here and help in another thing like help in saving people.”

The first time she saw blood she almost fainted.

“Of course I was scared, I was scared too much, but there was something inside of me telling me that there is something that I am supposed to keep doing,” she says softly. “I can't just be afraid and go, I am supposed to stay and time after time I learn and I have more courage to do this.”

Now dealing with the influx of wounded has become almost mechanical, part of a daily macabre routine. Despite the horror of what she is witnessing, dwelling on her own emotions is a luxury she cannot afford.

Aya comes from a conservative Sunni family, and when it comes to the future of Syria that she is fighting for, she says she wants to see something of a blend of both an Islamic and a democratic Syria.

“But democracy is better.” She adds. “We need freedom, we need democracy, we need to say what we want without anyone saying to us ‘why are you saying this?’”

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It was also in Aleppo that I met a young woman who goes by the pseudonym Sama. She walked into the room at a hospital run by the opposition, sporting jeans and tall mud covered boots, her brown hair tied in a loose ponytail, carrying a computer, with a camera slung around her neck.

Having grown accustomed to hearing male voices narrating the various *YouTube* videos, and up until then, only come across male “media activists”, we were – to say the least – surprised.

Sama, in her early 20s, was living with the hospital “staff” – now made up mostly of young men and a handful of women, many of whom had no prior medical experience. At the onset of the uprising she was among many who organized demonstrations at Aleppo University. With aspirations to eventually go into journalism, she picked up a camera and began filming the dead and the wounded. It is something she says one can never get used to.

The day before we met, an artillery round had slammed into a crowd of people waiting for bread.

“Despite all the chaos and the pressure around, four-five times I just wanted to put the camera down and sit and cry.” She told us. “But you think to yourself there is a message you have to get out, it’s hard and harsh, but it has to get out, it’s your responsibility. You get depressed but then you force yourself to be strong again.”

Among her colleagues at the hospital are people of different backgrounds –moderate, conservative, Islamist, Salafi– and on a regular basis they debate what the future Syria should look like. In some way, the revolution has brought together individuals who otherwise would have never interacted, to trade ideas and ideologies.

“We even shout at each other.” Sama tells us with a wry smile. “I was with the revolution from the start, the revolution is one line, it’s not Islamist, it’s for all Syrians and Syrians are from all sects.”

“At the end, the revolution’s original ideals are going to endure because we are here, those that started it will be there at the end” She adds. “If something happens and this changes it means it’s our fault, because we gave up.”

Still now when Sama heads out camera in hand she tends to cover her hair to avoid unnecessary attention and hassle.

There is a growing sense of awareness among female activists about the need to ensure the empowerment of women, now more than perhaps ever before. Little reported is that Syrian women were among the first to demonstrate against the regime. The country is no stranger to seeing women in high power roles – lawyers, bankers, and politicians.



Despite that, women remain grossly underrepresented when it comes to the local opposition councils inside Syria and the opposition bodies that exist outside of the country.

Rajaa Altalli, Catherine’s younger sister, was in the U.S. on a Fulbright scholarship to do her masters in mathematics in Boston when the uprising began. Since then she’s co-founded the “Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria.”

Rajaa –now based in southern Turkey– has been researching the role of her fellow countrywomen in the Syrian revolution and running workshops focusing on increasing that role.

Through her work and research with some of the underprivileged women at the refugee camps, she found that their main concerns about a future Syria were education and the economy. Politically speaking, they wanted freedom, justice, and dignity, though some believed that women should not have leading roles in legislation or governance.

“Some are very inspirational, and some are willing to learn. In Syria, we are not exposed to politics and some women would really like to be involved, they just don’t know how, and we don’t have the advocacy or lobbying skills.” She explains, speaking over *Skype*. “The men, especially the men now involved in politics, they have more opportunities to educate themselves and gain experience.”

She is focusing her efforts on empowering women from different levels of society, giving them the skill sets to make their voices and their demands heard.

“My approach is that women are still not doing enough to advocate for themselves and we are not lobbying each other.” She says. “If women don’t work for it, men won’t care about it.”

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Back from a recent Syrian women’s conference in Doha that brought together 15-20 female activists, she said that among the many discussions was the role that women needed to play in a post-Assad era –from transitional justice, to rule of law, to governance– and generally speaking, getting women more involved in the decision making process.

The group set the ambitious aim of reaching 50 percent representation for women in government, and trying to alter the dynamics of the local councils and opposition bodies by demanding and working for more female representation.

“The pillars of extremism and radicalism are usually to oppress women,” Rajaa says, “Having more women empowered is hitting one of the pillars that support extremism.”

She and others fully realize that the next rulers may want to sideline them, relegate them to the shadows.

For the women of the Syrian opposition, this is a two-pronged battle. Fighting for freedom against an oppressive regime, and battling just as hard to ensure that their individual rights do not perish in the process as the landscape and dynamics of the Syrian uprising shift.

It is by no means an easy goal, nor is its success ensured, but the majority of Syrian women I met over the last two years through my reporting are not going to sit by silently and watch their freedoms stolen from them or their future dictated to them.