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PART B6

From: Anne-Marie Slaughter [REDACTED]
Sent: Sunday, June 24, 2012 8:49 PM
To: H
Cc: Jacob J Sullivan (SullivanJJ@state.gov); Cheryl Mills; Abedin, Huma
Subject: Great read on conditions in Damascus from NPR's Deborah Amos

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Note the reference to young Damascenes learning about democracy from American shows on You Tube!

Syrians Now Willing To Talk, But No Names, Please

by [Deborah Amos](#)



[Enlarge](#)Anonymous/SANA/AP

President Bashar Assad addresses Parliament on June 3. Syrians in the capital, Damascus, have become more willing to speak out, though they still don't want to be identified by name. Many feel the Assad regime is losing control of parts of the country.

June 24, 2012

In Damascus, Syrians now openly speak their minds, but often won't offer a name for the record.

The "wall of fear" is crumbling even in the capital, where the security police have the heaviest presence. Syrians have lived under surveillance and emergency law for years, but after 15 months of anti-government protest and a brutal response by the regime, the killings have changed people.

"Now, I believe that most of the Syrians feel in their bones that the regime is over and it's only a matter of time," said one veteran activist, "There are wide areas that aren't under the control of the regime, and Syrians are learning to speak for themselves."

The capital is still under heavy control, however, with military checkpoints on the highway into the city and patrols in the heart of Damascus after dark. The sound of shooting and explosions in the suburbs, the poor neighborhoods of Douma and Qudsaya, now reach the wealthy neighborhoods of the city.

"Now, things are too graphic. You can hear the bombs here in Damascus," says a musician turned activist. "I had a friend who said, 'It's not happening,' but they can go to their balconies and look east. It's not a secret any more."

A Desire To Talk

The impulse to speak out is getting stronger, especially among the young.

Shortly after I interviewed two 18-year-old high school seniors on the street, they called the number on the business card I gave them.

"Meet us at the Hamedeyah market tomorrow at 11 a.m.," one says quickly, referring to a Damascus landmark. He says he's on a pay phone that can't be traced.

The two could be arrested for talking to an American reporter, but they are excited to share the details of the fighting in their neighborhood. They say the Free Syrian Army, the rebels opposing the government, is getting stronger.



[Enlarge](#)Rim Haddad/AFP/Getty Images

A Syrian soldier looks on as shooting takes place in the Damascus suburb of Douma last month. Sporadic fighting has been breaking out in and around the capital Damascus in recent weeks.



Rim Haddad/AFP/Getty Images

A Syrian soldier looks on as shooting takes place in the Damascus suburb of Douma last month. Sporadic fighting has been breaking out in and around the capital Damascus in recent weeks.

"We don't know what freedom smells like, what it tastes like, but we want it," says one of the teens, who says he learned about democracy from American television shows on YouTube.

In this ancient bazaar, where merchants sell cardamom and anise from bursting burlap bags, they talk about modern concepts of citizenship and rights.

"It's not just freedom," one says. "We want new laws for freedom and equality."

They are brave revolutionaries until too many eyes are watching. They lose their nerve and quickly hurry home.

A Time Of Uncertainty

"The regime will fall, but it's not clear who will come after, and the majority is afraid," says Dr. Abdul Aziz Kheyer, who offers a more sober assessment of the uncertainty ahead.

A former political prisoner who was jailed for more than a decade for his views, Kheyer says he is amazed by the political awakening among Syrians as the regime weakens.

"It became clear that the security police were not capable of arresting everyone who is speaking," he says. Day by day, "Syrians are becoming free humans for the first time in their lives." Parents look to their children for advice on how to navigate Facebook and how far they can go in posting politically sensitive opinions, he says.

A young activist is eager to meet again. We have exchanged e-mails over the months. She was part of a group that poured red dye into the fountains of downtown Damascus last year.

It was a risky act that unnerved the security police and was celebrated on Facebook pages as a clever form of civil disobedience.



Middle East

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Middle East

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"Everything has its time," she says, as a way to explain why she now supports the Free Syrian Army. The success of the rebels adds to her confidence. At work, she says, the pro-regime people in the office are now sure she is an activist.

"Some of them are scared of me," she says, "and some of them hope I will get arrested and get punished for what I'm doing."

People Are Picking Sides

The regime's supporters and opponents in the capital live in a wary standoff now. The middle ground is quickly disappearing as many people in Damascus pick a side. The activist says of the pro-regime supporters who used to provoke her, "They are having second thoughts; maybe we aren't as powerful as we thought."

Government supporters are speaking out, too, also without a name for the record.

In an interview in his office, the general in charge of Tishreen Military Hospital blames outside powers for arming the rebels. The casualty rate for the army and police is climbing.

On a walk through the wards, a colonel is moaning on a stretcher in the hallway. He was ambushed on the way to work that morning. The wounds on his hands and stomach are freshly bandaged. Military funerals are held in a courtyard at the hospital. The ceremonies are now scheduled every day.

"No name, no pictures," says the head of the hospital as an assistant serves tea. His predecessor was assassinated outside his home in February.

The state news agency blamed members of an "armed terrorist group" for the murder, the first assassination of a senior officer. Since then, there have been many more.

"It's been 15 months now, and the government can't do anything to say its over," says another unnamed activist in an interview in his office.

In some parts of Damascus, people are already living a civil war, he says, "in the suburbs it's already started."

As the violence comes closer and closer to the capital, he still keeps in touch with pro-regime supporters, old college friends, neighbors, even relatives, who share his fear of Syria's violent slide into the unknown.

Lately, he says, some of them are speaking out against the regime, too.

"It is enough, they should go." It is a sentiment he says he hears more often now. "They say, 'If you can't control it, so you should go.'"

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