

The Roles and Challenges of Women in the Syrian Revolution
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(Photo USIP)

“We are all fighting for dignity, freedom and human rights. That’s it.”

On Friday, March 9, 2012, the U.S. Institute of Peace hosted a moderated discussion panel, co-sponsored with United for Free Syria and the Syrian Emergency Task, to address the critical role of women in Syria’s current revolution and what this means for women in a potential post-Assad Syria. Moderated by Kathleen Kuehnast, the director of USIP’s Center of Innovation on Gender and Peacebuilding, the program included four Syrian female panelists, all of whom are active supporters of the opposition movement by various means. The panelists discussed the monumental contributions women have made to the progress of Syria’s political revolution, which have been largely overshadowed and unrecognized in the media. They also answered audience questions concerning the role of the international community, accusations of disunity among the opposition, and their predictions for a post-Assad Syria. This discussion was part of the Institute’s commitment to conflict management, training and peacebuilding in Syria and around the world.

The discussion began with identification of the five main sectors to which women are most heavily contributing in support of the revolution: humanitarian and medical aid, the media, protection, civic engagement, and the political and economic sector. Because the al-Assad regime has restricted international humanitarian aid groups from entering the country for much of the past year, women have taken on the responsibility of distributing desperately needed food and medical supplies. Women are often the ones providing medical assistance to the wounded due to the lack of safety in local hospitals. One of the panelists also noted that the security forces are often easier women, which has allowed female activists to smuggle supplies and food to those in need. Women have also filled the void in media coverage of the revolution that strict government mandates have created within Syria by secretly filming demonstrations, documenting human rights violations and uploading these videos and information to the internet. In an effort to provide protection where they can, many women have opened up their homes to fleeing activists and refugees. Women have also become civically engaged in the movement by organizing their communities in numerous ways. One panelist spoke of the huge role women have been playing in coordinating demonstrations by creating and distributing flyers, and even going door-to-door in the middle of the night to deliver messages of up-coming demonstrations to their neighbors’ doorsteps. Within the political and economic sector, many women have been the initiators of various coalition groups that aim to unite Syrian minorities, and work to raise funds for the opposition.

One of the panelists, a Syrian author who is currently the Executive Director of the America Arab Communication & Translation Center, moved audience members with her passionate proclamation of the primary motivations behind the revolution. She attempted to quell the popular misconception that the opposition is waging a personal attack against the al-Assad regime and stated, “We do not have any

personal issues with the regime. This is a national issue and a national fight.” She stressed that women are not fighting for the sole purpose of women’s rights, but are fighting in unity with all Syrians, both men and women, for the equality of all against a government that has for years considered women and other minorities second-class citizens. “We are fighting to make Syria a place for all Syrians.”

The question and answer portion of the discussion began with an audience member asking the panelists how, in their opinion, can the international community help and assist the revolutionary movement? The panelists responded by reiterating the desperate need for increased humanitarian and medical aid for activists and civilians in Syria and by asking for support of the Free Syrian Army. They also urged the audience to do all they can to put pressure on their national governments to unite with the international community against the al-Assad regime.

Another audience member posed a question that called into question certain recent events that have aroused accusations of disunity among the Syrian opposition. One panelist simply replied, “Well, that’s reality. You cannot call the revolutionaries disunited because of the words of a select few.” Another noted that differences of opinion are natural, and even healthy, and are fundamental to democracy. She stated, “*We are all fighting for dignity, freedom and human rights. That’s it.*”

The final part of the discussion focused on the predicted future of Syria in a post-Assad era. There is a fear that the country will face a regression in women’s rights that have come out of the revolution if the new regime does not view this issue as a priority. However, all four panelists were united in their optimistic view of the future. One predicted that as a result of the revolution, and the toll it takes on the male population of Syria, women will be forced to take on many more bread-winning roles and thus bringing them closer to equality in the eyes of their society, and hopefully even influential roles within a democratic and secular government. When asked what if the opposition is not successful in the revolution, one panelist replied, “That is not a concern anymore. The Assad regime is finished, and everyone knows it. Now we are just waiting for them to leave.” The panelists concluded the discussion by expressing their hope that the extraordinary contributions women have made to the Syrian revolution will one day be recognized, and that credit will be given where it is so rightly due.