

Syria's Quest for Justice & Unity

An interview with Dima Moussa

by Adèle Audouy

Lawyer, feminist activist and a prominent figure of the Syrian opposition, Dima Moussa advocates for an inclusive political transition, the establishment of genuine democratic institutions, and the necessity of a national debate open to all components of Syrian society.

Dima Moussa is a Syrian lawyer, feminist and politician from Homs. After earning degrees in electrical engineering and law in the United States, she practiced as a lawyer while actively advocating for the rights of Arab women. The outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011 marked a turning point in her life, leading her to co-found the *Syrian National Council* and become actively involved in political opposition. She joined the *Syrian Negotiation Commission* in 2017 and was appointed as a member of the *Constitutional Committee* in 2019. She was also elected Vice President of the *National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces* in 2018, and again in 2023. In these roles, she has advocated for an inclusive political transition process in Syria.

A founding member of the *Syrian Women's Political Movement*, she campaigns for gender equality and the participation of women in Syria's political sphere. Her commitment is distinguished by a feminist and democratic approach, advocating for democratic governance based on justice, human rights, and the participation of all components of Syrian society.

In this interview conducted on January 8 on the sidelines of the first press conference of the *Syrian Women's Political Movement* held in Damascus, she reflects on her political engagement since 2011, as well as the challenges and hopes surrounding Syria's future after the fall of the Assad regime. In her view, the

country's future depends on political pluralism, respect for fundamental freedoms and transitional justice.

Books & Ideas: Dima Moussa, could you introduce yourself in a few words?

Dima Moussa: I have been a member of the Syrian opposition since the beginning of the revolution, in fact, since the formation of the first official opposition body in 2011, which was the *Syrian National Council*¹, of which I remain a member to this day. I have thus gone through all the stages of the war in Syria, also working with Syrian civil society. Given my legal background, I have also assisted, as a consultant, certain activist groups documenting human rights violations, crimes against humanity, and other crimes committed by the regime.

At the start of the revolution, I was based in the United States as my family had been forced to leave Syria in 1993 for political reasons, under the presidency of the father [Hafez al-Assad, editor's note]. In early 2013, I moved to Türkiye to be closer to Syria, believing that the fall of the regime was imminent—but better late than never. Since then, I have remained in Türkiye. I returned to Syria for the first time at the end of December 2024, a few weeks after the fall of the regime. Now, I am planning to move back to the country within the next few months to continue my political work there.

Books & Ideas: What is the Syria you found upon your return?

Dima Moussa: In a way, it is not so different, but this is not a good thing. Many places have remained exactly the same as when I left them 31 years ago. When a country does not change in 31 years, it mostly means that it has regressed. Of course, there is massive destruction, but that was not really a discovery. Working within the opposition all these years, I was in constant contact with the situation on the ground. From the beginning of the revolution, I collaborated with activists and local networks, particularly in my home region of Homs, and with activists in Damascus. We followed everything in real-time, receiving raw information, images of bombings and

¹ The Syrian National Council (SNC), founded in Istanbul in August 2011, was the main political coalition of the Syrian opposition to Bashar al-Assad's regime. Emerging in the context of the popular uprising in Syria and the brutal repression that followed, its goal was to unify opposition forces, support the mobilizations, and promote a democratic and pluralistic state. Comprising various political currents—Islamists, secularists, nationalists, liberals, minority representatives or even human rights activists—the SNC quickly became weakened by internal divisions, gradually losing influence to the *National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces*, which was established in 2012.

destruction. But indeed no matter how much you see from a distance, until you witness it with your own eyes, you cannot fully grasp the scale of the situation.

So the Syria I found upon my return is an exhausted country scarred by immense destruction and a population drained of all strength. The regime has left the country in such a state that one can no longer even speak of an economy. People are struggling to survive; today, more than 90% of the population lives below the poverty line². This is one of the most urgent priorities to address. At the same time, I also sense a slight improvement in people. You can see it on their faces—an immense weight seems to have been lifted. They are kinder to one another. For a long time, I wondered why we Syrians were not more compassionate toward each other. Now, I am beginning to understand. The regime did everything in its power to divide the population. Mistrust reigned everywhere because the security apparatus had infiltrated every aspect of daily life to the point that Syrians stopped trusting one another, even between brothers and sisters. There are countless stories of individuals who reported a family member to the security services over a simple remark—or even words that were never actually spoken—simply because it was the easiest way to take revenge in a personal dispute. Adding to this a disastrous economic situation, people became anxious, perpetually exhausted, and no longer felt like talking to anyone.

Books & Ideas: You have been a member and twice Vice President of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces³, supporting various initiatives from abroad during the war in this capacity. Were you prepared for the fall of the regime? In your view, what are the next steps, both for you and for the coalition? More broadly, what are now the main challenges and priorities for Syria's future?

Dima Moussa: We worked for a long time to ensure a smooth political transition through a negotiation process. But the regime rejected this idea from the very beginning as early as 2012 when the first talks were held. Personally, I was a

² According to the UN, 90% of the population in Syria lives below the poverty line (approximately less than \$3 per person per day).

³ The *National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces* was formed in 2012 in Doha, Qatar, to unify the various factions of the opposition to Bashar al-Assad's regime. Supported by international actors—including the United States, France, Turkey, and several Gulf countries—its goal was to structure an opposition capable of politically representing the Syrian revolution on the international stage. Unlike the Syrian National Council, it considered the possibility of negotiating a political transition with Bashar al-Assad.

member of the *Syrian Negotiation Commission* (SNC)⁴ and the *Constitutional Committee*⁵ and I saw from the inside just how unwilling the regime was to find a solution. It refused to reach any agreement on anything concerning Syria. Yet, we always maintained that we did not want a military victory, that we did not want this regime to fall through military means because that would inevitably mean more fighting, more violence, and more human losses. In the end, what has happened today is indeed a military victory. However, it seems to be primarily the result of an accumulation of frustrations on the part of the international community and regional actors. The regime was given multiple opportunities including the chance to reintegrate into the Arab League and normalize its relations with the UN and other states, but it never made the slightest effort in return. Ultimately, a military effort became necessary, but this outcome should not be viewed solely from that perspective. In reality, the Syrian people's struggle has been ongoing for 14 years—if not 54. Throughout this entire period, there has been political work, real engagement from civil society and significant humanitarian efforts. What happened recently [the fall of the regime on December 8, 2024, editor's note] is merely the culmination of this long struggle, where someone had to, in the end, materialize the change—and it happened.

Now, we must all work together but this cannot happen without learning from the past. One of Syria's fundamental problems has always been the absence of political pluralism. Political activity was limited to a single party⁶—or at best, to those tolerated by the regime. This must change. That is why we insist that, for the national conference⁷ to succeed, it must include all political forces, whether political parties, the coalition, or independents—like myself. All these groups must take part in this

⁴ The Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC) was established in 2017 in Riyadh to represent the Syrian opposition in peace talks held under the auspices of the UN. Composed of members from various opposition factions, its goal was to negotiate a political transition in Syria in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

⁵ The Syrian Constitutional Committee, formed in 2019 under a UN initiative and composed of 150 members divided among the regime, the opposition and civil society, was tasked with drafting a new constitution for Syria. Despite multiple rounds of negotiations, it failed to achieve significant progress due to political obstructions.

⁶ Under the Assad regime, Syria has been dominated by the Baath Party which has held power since 1963 and maintained a monopoly over political life. Following the coup of November 16, 1970, Hafez al-Assad took control of the country and a new constitution enshrined the Baath Party as the "leader of the state and society," effectively preventing any form of political pluralism. Opposition was systematically repressed, the press was silenced, and society was tightly controlled by the security apparatus established by the regime. In 2000, Bashar al-Assad assumed the presidency after a constitutional amendment lowered the minimum age requirement and bypassed military obligations, fueling criticism of the establishment of a "hereditary republic."

⁷ After the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 8, 2024, Syria's interim president, Ahmad al-Chareh, announced the upcoming holding of a "national dialogue conference" aimed at serving as a platform for discussions among the various components of Syrian society. He specified that this conference would include broad participation from Syrian society, with votes on issues such as the dissolution of parliament and the drafting of a new constitution.

national dialogue to ensure the broadest possible representation and a stance that reflects the diversity of Syrians and their affiliations. So far, the focus has mainly been on religious and ethnic identities. However, the political stakes are much broader and encompass a wide range of perspectives on Syria's future that must be discussed and contribute essential elements to the debate.

***Books & Ideas:* As a lawyer, how do you view, from a legal perspective, the current debates surrounding the future Syrian Constitution? In your opinion, what measures would best ensure a truly inclusive process?**

Dima Moussa: Along with the members of the coalition, we have gained significant experience in this area over the years. I was part of the *Syrian Constitutional Committee* from its creation in 2019 under the auspices of the UN. I was also a member of the drafting committee, which met with regime representatives on eight occasions. Although these meetings led to nothing—since the regime's sole intention was to systematically obstruct any progress—we nonetheless carried out important preparatory work. We studied Syria's constitutional history, the evolution of society, its needs, and what should be included in the Constitution to ensure that what happened 50 years ago, when the Assad clan took power, and what has occurred over the past 14 years in terms of violations, can never happen again. Indeed, most of these violations stemmed from specific powers granted by the Constitution itself. Today, everyone believes that Syria operates under a presidential system due to the immense power held by the president. Yet, that is not the case: the Syrian Constitution is, in fact, a hybrid system, neither fully parliamentary nor fully presidential.

We ultimately designed three versions of a possible constitutional framework: a presidential system, a parliamentary system, and a mixed system. We also delved into an issue that, in my view, lies at the very root of the demands that led to the 2011 revolution: freedoms and rights. How can they be guaranteed? How can they be constitutionally protected without leaving them solely in the hands of the legislative power, which could be controlled by the regime? The president, for instance, had the power to issue decrees, meaning he could legislate alone.

We also examined key aspects that directly affect the people such as the structure of the articles concerning military powers and the prerogatives of the security apparatus, as these were the main tools the regime used to repress Syrians. It is crucial to strictly regulate these powers to prevent the abuses of the past from happening again.

Books & Ideas: You mentioned the issue of political plurality. Isn't there a risk that this could lead to the rise of radical Islamist movements thereby threatening the progressive agenda that was defended during the war?

Dima Moussa: No one wants extremism in Syria. Even Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) seems to have understood that radical Islamism cannot work here. I know that some, particularly in the West, view the Syrian situation by focusing on the role of HTS which is considered a terrorist organization. But for us today, in Syria, we must assess HTS based on its concrete actions. Ahmed al-Charaa⁸ has declared his intention to dissolve the organization. The current statements seem to send positive signals, affirming that Syria will be inclusive for all its citizens. Even the national conference he speaks of is being presented as open to everyone—which, in my opinion, explains why it has already been postponed several times. Our role as Syrians and as activists is to closely monitor these promises to ensure they do not remain mere statements but are actually translated into action. So far, we have not seen anything concrete, and we have even heard some negative remarks from several individuals within the group or their circles, as well as from the interim or provisional government—which remains and must remain provisional. However, it is significant to note that every time they have made a statement, there has been a reaction. People have protested and spoken out, including on social media. This shows a response that must be taken into account.

Now, when we look at Islamism in general, we cannot preemptively exclude a political group simply because we do not like it. That would be like deciding in advance that these individuals do not represent anyone. If we closely examine the varying degrees of religiosity and the importance that certain political groups place on Islamic teachings, we can see that there is indeed a segment of Syrian society that is quite religious. This is why I cannot exclude them, just as I ask not to be excluded myself. This is precisely where I have an issue with many Western countries that now come to us asking, "What about minorities?", "What about women?" ... You know, as a feminist⁹, I have often been accused of being influenced by the West when I speak

⁸Ahmad al-Charaa, also known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, is the leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an Islamist rebel group in Syria that traces its origins to the Al-Nusra Front—the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda—before breaking away in 2016 and merging with other rebel groups. In November 2024, HTS led the decisive offensive that resulted in the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 8. Following this victory, Ahmad al-Charaa was appointed Syria's interim president to oversee the transition period. On December 30, 2024, he announced the dissolution of HTS, effective January 29, 2025, and initiated measures to establish a temporary legislative council tasked with drafting a new constitution.

⁹ Dima Moussa is a founding member of the Syrian Women's Political Movement (SWPM). Founded in 2017, the SWPM is an organization dedicated to empowering Syrian women and ensuring their active participation in the political sphere. It also advocates for a democratic and pluralistic Syria, with the ultimate goal of achieving full gender equality in decision-making positions.

about women's rights, as if these ideas could only be defended by the West. But that is not the case. I, along with my fellow members of the *Syrian Women's Political Movement* for instance, advocate for women's rights because we see this struggle as just and necessary. We should not be excluded for that, and if I refuse to be excluded, then I cannot exclude others either.

So we must therefore establish very clear rules: it is crucial today to be open to everyone provided that the programs, ideologies and projects being debated concern Syria exclusively and do not extend beyond its borders. And it is precisely this kind of ideology, held by members of HTS, that I am referring to here.

***Books & Ideas:* One of Syria's defining features is its great ethnic and religious diversity. After decades of highly centralized power that benefited one community¹⁰ at the expense of others, many believe that, in the future, certain regions should be granted greater autonomy based on their religious specificities, which would require strong decentralization. Do you think a decentralized system could better ensure the representation of Syrians and address some of the country's major current challenges?**

Dima Moussa: This is a central debate and one of the questions that we Syrians must also discuss among ourselves. Every system has a certain degree of centralization and a certain degree of decentralization. The debate revolves around the extent of decentralization we want for Syria in the future, given that the country has been highly centralized. That being said, centralization is not necessarily a problem in itself: at times, a highly centralized system can function well. What level of autonomy and what prerogatives should be granted to the governorates? Which powers should remain exclusively centralized? Above all, I believe this is a subject that must be debated.

For my part, I believe that a balance is necessary to ensure a fair and equitable distribution of wealth—something we do not currently have—particularly in terms of political representation. We also need a certain degree of political decentralization to guarantee the representation of the different components of Syrian society but without, however, establishing quotas. Today, I do not want quotas for Kurds, Armenians or Assyrians, as that would only perpetuate the logic of division that

¹⁰The Assad family comes from the ethnoreligious group of Alawites (historically known as Nosayrites), a branch of heterodox Shiism. Since 1970, the regime established by the Assads has consolidated its power by relying on this segment of Syrian society, notably by placing members of the Alawite community at the head of the army and intelligence services and strengthening the idea that in Syria, the fate of this community was inseparable from that of the regime. This imbalance, particularly to the detriment of the Sunni community, fueled deep tensions that escalated dramatically after 2011.

Assad, father and son, sought to instill in society to consolidate their power. This also means that we must put in place a system that ensures fair representation for everyone, for example through local bodies or by creating smaller electoral districts to allow for better representation.

In any case, every Syrian you ask will have a different opinion on this subject. Even within the *National Coalition* of which I am a member, we have not yet reached a common position on this issue. Moreover, some topics, such as fundamental rights, the role of religion in the state, and the political system we envision, are extremely sensitive and provoke deep disagreements. It is therefore essential to debate them. But we also cannot simply put them to a vote which would inevitably result in a majority imposing a certain direction. Since these issues affect the fundamental rights of all, it is crucial to reach the broadest possible consensus where everyone must make concessions. In the end, everyone must leave the negotiating table with the feeling that they have compromised on some points but also gained guarantees in return. This is all the more important because today Syria is in a disastrous state left drained by the regime. And we cannot even speak of a unified Syria yet! Just look at the situation in the northeast of the country which remains unresolved and must also be taken into account.

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