

Conference Transcript

Inside Syria: 18 Months On

**Keynote Address: “Lessons Learned: Taking Stock of the
Opposition Journey”**

**Speaker: Dr Burhan Ghalioun, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle and
Former Chairman of the Syrian National Council**

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Professor Fawaz Gerges: It's really my pleasure to introduce the last speaker and a keynote speaker in this long talk today, Professor Burhan Ghalioun and Burhan does not really need much introduction. In myself, I have known Burhan for more than 20 years. I have known the academic Burhan Ghalioun over the years and if there is just really one word for me and is to my mind that describes Burhan Ghalioun is the word would be "progressive" because Burhan over the last 30 years or so has really done a great deal of work trying or attempting to deconstruct dominant traditional conventional narratives. For somebody like myself who has read Burhan in Arabic. Burhan writes mainly in Arabic and French -- prolific writer. I don't really have the time to even list his publications in Arabic in particular, dozens of publications over years and they have generated a great deal of heat, a great deal of debate, a great deal -- I think of emotional reactions throughout the Arab world.

A few years ago, when Al Jazeera was a sacred word in the Arab world, Burhan wrote a devastating critique of the impact -- negative impact of Al Jazeera on the Arab imagination. This is the same, I mean, Burhan Ghalioun now -- when I read some of the commentaries about Burhan and the media, I don't recognise this gentleman. I must confess I was surprised when Burhan had been chosen to lead the Syrian National Council. Why? Because first of all, I didn't think that Burhan had any political ambitions. I also did not think that Burhan, the academic progressive, gentle academic had the skills to navigate the complex mine fields of Syrian politics. No, I'm not surprised by some of the rhetoric that I have read about Burhan because, as the masters have told us, politics is all about struggle, about political struggle and that's Burhan. Obviously, he has decided to join the fray in Syria and he is a leading player. What he will do today-- and I have urged Burhan -- is to really give us a critical account of the oppositions journey in the last 18 months and I know, as you all know, Burhan wears two hats, the academic and the activist. I would like really Burhan today to wear the academic hat and give us basically an account of what are the lessons that the opposition has learned in the last 18 months. Please join me in welcoming *Istaz* Burhan Ghalioun.

Professor Burhan Ghalioun: First of all, allow me to thank my brother, Mr Fawaz for the invitation, for the kind extended invitation. Allow to me to thank -- extended thanks to each and every one of you for taking the time to be here. The main purpose of this session is to actually engage in a dialogue about the Syrian revolution, the obstacles and problems it has faced and also my main task here is to answer any questions you might have about all of that.

I want to assure Fawaz here that I did not, as he said, have any political ambition, but I will not say that I do not have any political ambition for the future either. I felt I was actually asked and I was chosen to be the leader of the SNC by the people on

the ground, by the young people who took to the ground who maybe identified with what I've written about the revolution and found that it echoes their vision for the future of Syria. So I put myself with the service of these youth who took on to the street. I put myself in the service of them to help seeing their goal being fulfilled and I'm going to go back to my university. Actually, the leave I took from my work as an academic is about to finish in three months' time. When I applied for my leave to be able to take this role, I had to give a reason and the reason I had to give -- 'I'm taking a year off to write a book about the Syrian political movement and the Syrian revolution'. I'm not sure if I'm going to get to write the book. But I've got the sabbatical.

What I want to present to you in my talk now is an overlook, sort of a summary of the situation in the Syrian revolution over the last 18 months of its time. In my outline, I have three main points. I'm going to discuss now and then, after that, any questions you have, I'm going to answer it in the Q&A section. So the first point of my outline would be describing the status quo of the current situation really. The second point, I'm going to address is how we got here and the third point is what is the solution for the humanitarian catastrophe when living in Syria nowadays.

Right from the beginning of the revolution in Syria, there were questions raised about the nature of what's happening, the nature of the movement. Months into the revolution, discussions started in the international community -- whether it's a sectarian war, a civil war, sectarian/civil war, where we're heading, what's going on. Well, the Syrian regime on the other hand, right from the day, the first months, they said, these are Salafi gangs, these are Salafi armed gangs. What we ended up with -- there was a long and prolonged hesitation of acknowledging this revolution for what it is, a revolution for dignity and freedom as other revolutions across that happened across the world has been acknowledged already. It started exactly as it started in Tunis and in Egypt, Indonesia and in Egypt. It started of a group of young people taking to the street in peaceful manners, expressing their desire to change, to overthrow the regime or maybe to actually just change it towards democracy. The essence of all the Syrian revolution, as in the other revolutions, was the questions of the democracy and freedom and, up until now, despite all what we're seeing, when the Syrian youth get the chance to demonstrate their goal for freedom, they jumped again and again, 'Freedom, freedom.' If you go back and check the documentation that is available on YouTube for the first six months' protest, you're going to hear two predominant chants -- 'freedom, freedom' and the other one was 'peaceful, peaceful.'

Now, we changed. Things evolved and the nature of the conflict has changed. It changed from a conflict that is internal; it's Syrian against Syrian to change a regime. The main purpose of that was to change a regime that is corrupt and it's just a tyrant regime. Right now, what we have is a conflict that is more regional and actually prophesying international . . . The other shift that happened in the way things developed was we shifted away from peacefulness. The demonstration was

completely and entirely peaceful. There was, with difficulties, documentation of how many points of demonstration took place in one day and sometimes, we had 800, up to 900 different points of demonstrations that has been documented. Right now, we shifted into a phenomena of an armed people because the Free Syrian Army are the people arming themselves to defend themselves in every neighbourhood, in every little village, even the most remote, tiniest villages. People, young men -- the main question, the main obsession right now is to find weapons because they would carry it in defence of their own people and to protect themselves. We're not in front of a systematically organised army when we talk about the Free Syrian Army. We're just talking about people who took up arms to defend themselves.

No one in Syria, no one -- the sons of the Syrian Citizens who participated in the revolution, has chosen to militarise it. No one has chosen to move towards an armed struggle really against this regime and no one has chosen either to move the political struggle that we're engaged in, that was internal to more of a regional proxy conflict. It was the regime who made these changes and they made the choice of these changes. The regime chose right from the beginning to prevent the protesters from being able to congregate into a major square which was their goal following the suit of the Midan Tahrir protest. That's where we started seeing the phenomena of people arming themselves because the regime, right from the beginning, said that to prevent this political momentum of people gathering in the street, they resorted as a regime to systematic, organised and calculated killings.

So when I talked about calculated, what I meant is there was actually a number. At the beginning, the cap for those who are allowed to be killed on a daily rate to prevent people from protesting was 20 to 25. There were leaked documents from the Syrian *mukhabarat* that prove that. And after that, the cap then became 50 to 60 and then in the month of June, it became 100 to 200 and right now it seems that there is no maximum number allowed for how many people could be killed on a day from the regime because the killing is not to prevent people from protesting and congregating in streets anymore. The killing is actually their only method to hang on to power and stay in power. The regime understands very well right now if the regime power stop killing, the armed man of every village, the popular army, will immediately disperse into bits of land and control it.

The president has said or declared a month or some month and a half ago that now, 'we're on state of war, we're in a real state to war.' After that, we have seen an actual state of war waged against the Syrian people. Maybe it was touched on in the earlier session where one of the contributors to this workshop talked about the level of the damage and destruction inflicted in Syria. It's really not to be described with words less than its a humanitarian total disaster. You have cities that are destroyed and knocked down. You've got massive killings. You have got massacres. Children are being killed. You've got women being raped. That's the only way the regime can...The tragedy now is how sometimes people in the press and people who are into political analysis describe what's happening nowadays in Syria as a civil war.

Why I'm saying it's a tragedy is because I believe that the war right now is against the people. It's a war waged with airplanes, with artillery and with tanks. Yes, one would have to admit that there are reactions here and there and you could see counter reactions, but the bulk of what's happening is a people with the shelling and bombardment and whatever come [inaudible].

Also, the changing of the nature of the conflict into a regional and international proxy conflict on the Syrian land has blocked all the possibilities of any possible solution because, even if you talk about military solutions, the regime right now for the Syrian people to face, the regime still has military capacities. They still have more and more military capacities to use for more murder and the regionalising of this conflict has complicated the matter further and any solution is not going to be easy. What we're faced with was the corrupted sort of a conflict where people are going to be killed more and more.

That leads me to the question how did we evolve to this point? How did we get to this point and who was responsible for this utmost catastrophe inflicted on the residents, on the civilians and also on the infrastructure and what is the future and fate for Syria right now? And that leads me to the lessons I have been asked to talk to you, about the lessons learned from 18 months of the Syrian revolution. I say that the Syrian opposition says that it's the fault of their international community. It's the international community's failure to act and is to blame. The international community looks back and says no, it's actually the fault of the Syrian opposition because they're not united. It's as if there is no two other factors to take into consideration here, but the international community versus the opposition.

First of all, the first lesson after 18 months of the Syrian revolution is that the Syrian regime is not a political regime. It's not even a nationalistic patriotic regime. It's actually acting [inaudible] blood and authority of occupation. The Syrian regime came to power through violence. It never sought to integrate or actually have any sort of participatory approach towards its own people, even in a partial way. It never answered to any political standard. Other authorities have to answer their people or have conditions they have to fulfil to get their people happy. It just only focused on having their people submissive and they've always done that through violence. It's only through violence or sometimes they resorted to manipulation. The way they always played and exploited any contradictions that are there in Syria, any fractions that are already there. They always manipulated it to rule.

The violence -- when I say that they wanted to make their people submissive only by violence here is what I mean: they wanted people to [inaudible] by fear of their violence, of their different security branches and apparatus, the issue of political imprisonment and arrests that was also used as part of the violence. Then the fourth issue here is the continuous and everlasting emergency laws that ruled Syrians. These were also accompanied by regulation and laws that exempted the Syrian security and those who were involved in Syrian security from any possible

questioning or any possible take putting them credible for what they commit. Actually, they ended up with a situation where the hand of the security services was free completely and the power of suppression was free to do whatever they wanted. And now, when the Syrian regime is using airplanes, tanks and artilleries against its own people in the villages and towns in Syria, it proves the statement that I've just made. It's acting like an occupation force, not as an authority. It's a regime that's closed in on itself and has no connection to the constituency it has really. The people on the ground, they don't even care. The people who are in the Syrian regime, they don't even really care about actually getting any popular legitimacy. They just want to force people, [inaudible] people by fear and make them submissive by repression.

The second learned lesson after 18 months of the Syrian revolution is how incapable of action the international community or what was referred to generally as international community -- organisations that are known to identify the international community such as the UN or the international council in the UN -- they are incapable of taking any decision or action to prevent the continuation of what you're seeing and the massacres. This regime is still getting a lot of political and military support from what are referred to as great nations or great powers as Russia and China. While the Western Bloc has become known as the Friends of Syria Bloc, they are still hesitant and they lack the initiative or the will to do anything about the bloc of the Syrian people. Five months into the establishment of the Syrian National Council or the SNC, the Syrian National Council has not received any or whatsoever financial support from any state or any country. People were having to finance their own revolution up until that point. By then, we were 11 to 12 months into the revolution and people have to finance their own revolution without any support whatsoever. We've got speeches -- we've got very supportive speeches, a lot of rhetoric. It's almost as if these messages of support were illusionary rather than real support and even the Friends of Syria didn't do any real action that would have stopped the violence against the Syrian people.

The division of the international community, its hesitation and its incapacity of action has actually played a very encouraging role of the continuation of the violence on behalf of the Syrian regime or rather the escalation of violence you've seen recently because now the Syrian regime feels like they're not going be punished. They're going to get away with all that commitment. So now, there are different reasons why the international committee and why the different countries have failed to provide any solutions. Some wanted or hang on to the possibility of a political solution. They have illusions about the nature of Assad himself and the possibility of any political solution with him. Some other countries had no interest, no stakes to get involved at all. Some countries maybe have the desire to go into deeper crisis. There are different motives on why people failed to act, but they have failed to act.

Now, listen. The third lesson, I'm going to talk about the Syrian opposition which is the sort of more attractive subject to talk about, especially for the international diplomacy and international press. The Syrian opposition has to say that it has not

brought up its coordination and action to the point where it could represent a real leadership of the revolutionary movement taking place on the ground. Like the international community, they were divided. Some groups of the Syrian opposition have illusions of any possible political solution with such a regime. Other groups though bet on an international intervention which, by the day, we see that it was only a matter of rhetoric. It was never a real possibility represented for Syrians. So what I mentioned to you has prevented this one opposition from reformulating itself, from rebuilding and re-identifying itself actually in a way where it could present a strategic objective, vision into the real issues at hand with the crisis in Syria and it also prevented them from being able to either formulate influence or lead a public opinion. in Syria in regard to the Syrian revolution that has been continuing for the 18 months now.

Now, take into consideration that there is not a unified opposition that could actually lead the momentum that you've seen and the revolutionary movement that you're seeing on the ground. In the absence also – the second part – in the absence of political initiative – let me state here that Brahimi initiative is not going to have any better fate than that of Annan or any other political initiative that picked the way it was drawn. Also, the third aspect was that in the absence of any international willingness for an intervention that would stop the war, we are at a stalemate and this stalemate can be broken in any one of two ways. The first would be a change of balance on the ground of the forces on the ground and that would need the kind of weaponry that would support the FSA to be able to face the major issue which is the aircraft. They are being bombed with aircraft. Unless the FSA are being given the kind of weapons that would allow them to face, confront and neutralise the aircraft used against them by the Syrian regime, then we might not see that change of forces. The other thing that would actually be a factor into breaking the stalemate is if the Syrian opposition would be able to surpass its differences and division and to form a temporary government that would a) gain the trust officer and people, b) be a legitimate representative of that and replace the collapsing regime. So only maybe a matter of coordination and cooperation between groups of real friends of Syria, groups of countries that are friendly to Syria that would coordinate and work with three different levels inside the country: (a) a better unified opposition, (b) a temporary and transitional government, (c) a unified FSA temporary government that would allow us a way forward, that would allow us a way of breaking the stalemate and moving forward.

Professor Fawaz Gerges: Thank you Burhan, please join me in thanking Mr Burhan.